

Rayhan Khalid

The background is a dark navy blue. A large, glowing vertical shape, resembling a stylized '1' or a finger, is positioned on the right side. It has a red-to-orange gradient at the top and a bright white-to-yellow glow at the bottom. A teal gradient shape, resembling a stylized 'L' or a base, is positioned at the bottom left, meeting the glowing shape. The title 'THE OBSERVER' is written in large, white, sans-serif capital letters across the bottom left, partially overlapping the teal shape.

# THE OBSERVER

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Muhammad Adipati Barsel

## Preface

Before you read this novel, I want to say thank you from the bottom of my heart for spending your precious time reading this book. This book is the second novel I have written in my whole life. I haven't written a book lately because I was too busy getting distracted by real life. Maybe it wasn't 'real' at all because I spent too much time on the screen. Playing games, watching movies, reading books—these were all the things I did. But suddenly, the urge to write my innermost feelings to preserve my mortal existence arose. I closed my phone and began writing. One word became one sentence. One sentence became one paragraph. One paragraph became one chapter. Without realizing it, one chapter became one book.

Since a young age, I've loved reading books, especially translated ones. Translated books are often looked down upon. Many people consider them inferior to the original books because some writings are too formal or can't be directly translated, but there's always a beauty behind adversity. The way I could choose words from limited vocabularies made it easier to convey what I've been feeling. I'm not a native English speaker, so, as an Indonesian, my writing would struggle a lot with punctuation marks and grammatical errors, but I hope you can cope. Happy reading!

The Author

Jogjakarta, 2024.

# The Observer

To Mama, Papa, Bang Asel, dan Ade Angga.

## Chapter 1

Someone told me life is a gamble, consisting of infinite probabilities and odds—a labyrinth of options that we either choose or decline to determine our fate. The flop, turn, and river are the unpredictable things you calculate. Anything could happen on the table. It's unfair, isn't it? Once you've entered the game, you can't just leave the table. Folding all the time isn't an option either. Your chips are essentially a ticking bomb. Ignore it, and it'll explode. Cut the wrong wire, and it'll explode. The only way to avoid facing the reality is to keep playing. The essence of the game is you have to figure out how to play your 'cards' given by the dealer and place your bet wisely. There's no such thing as pure luck or bad luck. It's not about the value of your cards, it's how you decide your own destiny with your own hands. Certain people were born with a pair of aces and yet still lost to two pairs, while others hit the flush with 2 and 7 of diamonds. Losers complain while winners take the blame. Once, on the brink of death, I won the game with profound sacrifices. It wasn't money that I lost. It was people: people come and go, but feelings and emotions stay forever. Sound cliché as it may, it's actually real. Whenever I try to recall the memories, they fade with no traces of them ever existing. Instead, when I think about something else, completely unrelated, clouds gather and the rain of nostalgia begins pouring heavily. They return unexpectedly as shattered pieces of a puzzle. The fluid floods part of my hippocampus, and

suddenly crystallizes into clarity. It's like watching a film in retrospect, replaying scenes from a distant past. It was a long, long time ago. I was young and naive, as a teenager at that age should be. Life wasn't much easier back then. Maybe it was, or maybe as an 18-year-old, I wasn't strong and mature enough to deal with all the troubles. I made mistakes and wrong choices. I didn't even know what I was doing or if whether it was right or wrong. I lacked the courage to be honest with myself, with others. I pretended to be someone else. I hurt people, I hurt her, I hurt him, and of course, none other than myself. People also did the same thing to me. In the end, it didn't really matter who hurt you because you had to be responsible for your own feelings. In the end, it's just you and the voice inside your head. I wish I could save you.

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Back in my sophomore year, things were mostly strange. I was not sure exactly when it started, but the memory brings me back to when I was on my way to Jogjakarta to begin my third semester. I just barely woke up from a long nap. With my eyes still closed, my ears made the first move, capturing the sound of the raindrops drumming onto the window beside me. The second thing I noticed was my body felt numb from staying in the same position for hours, let alone the cold air, which I could see mist when I breathed. Somehow, they left the air conditioner turned on while it was raining outside. Lucky me, I put on my jacket before I fell asleep. I took the snack from the bag that I put on the empty seat beside me. A peanut-jam sandwich was enough to fill my hungry stomach. The bus swayed too much, especially when it rode past the cratered roads, making me drowsy somehow. People said traveling by bus was a tiring experience. The estimated time of arrival sometimes couldn't be predicted because of the traffic and

other factors. It was also not safe since bus accidents in Indonesia were so high. Most of them were owned by private companies, which tended to neglect the safety procedure and often cheat on the inspection. Despite knowing the fact that the buses operated with a bad condition, I didn't mind at all. It wasn't because I used to ride a bus. I rarely rode on a bus, at most once a year. The reason was simple enough: I didn't want to lose the unforgettable memories with my late mom that I have held onto for eight years.

It happened when I wasn't yet ten years old. Like other ten-year-old schoolers, I should have been at school, studying mathematical operations like addition and subtraction, eating my lunch—a simple fried noodle without the spicy seasoning, heated frozen meatballs, scrambled eggs, and a carton of milk that my mom always cooked every morning while I was still asleep. I would finish the day by playing football shoeless with a plastic ball on the empty field near the hospital and coming back home with dirt all over my body. But Mom said we were not going to school today. I protested and was mad at her. Mom didn't bother to argue and looked dejected. It was very unusual for her. I noticed my mistake, apologized to her, and walked upstairs to pack my clothes into a bag. I sat and waited for her to get ready. She had been on phone calls all day long. I heard her voice sound a little bit shrill. She finally hung up, closed her flip phone, and sat on the bed, doing nothing. It took several minutes until she stroked my hair, with watery eyes on her face, and told me how proud she was of me. I asked mom if father would be coming, and she said no. Father was on a business trip. He only got home twice a year for a week or two. He must be so busy. Mom quietly packed her things. We ordered a taxi and went to the bus terminal. We got on the bus as soon as we arrived. The bus departed after the door closed.



The steady humming of the engine and occasional air brakes filled the silence. Everyone on the bus seemed to mind their own business. Like other kids at a young age, I had a spurt of energy to spend, yet I didn't have much to do, so I just watched the buildings and rice fields along the way. I was so bored and tried to sleep, but it failed miserably. The hours flew by and it was getting dark outside. Street lights caught the glimpse of mom's expression. Mom always closed her eyes from the beginning. I bet she was crying deep inside her heart, so I did my best not to annoy her with my childish nature. I reached the point where I was so sleepy when mom suddenly started a conversation. She was more like talking to herself rather than talking to his own son. She began talking about grandma, about her old life, and her marriage. She tried to let out her feelings that she endured all this time. 10-year-old me didn't understand a single thing. One thing I understood was that mom was just an ordinary person, like others, who had her own stories and her own life, and the most important thing I realized was that she was lonely. After spending some time there, Grandma told me that my parents had decided to separate, so two weeks turned into forever. Mom visited me once a month because she had to work hard in the city to cover my school expenses. Dad never visited at all. I heard he married her secretary. It was okay for me. I still had my mother. Unfortunately, I could only spend a short time with her. She passed away one year after the divorce. This is the last time I saw dad, paying his last respects to Mom. Grandma did her best to raise me after my Mom's funeral. She provided for my needs, gave me space when I needed it, surprised me with a guitar, introduced me to The Beatles, and loved me unconditionally. I finally graduated from high school and chose to live on my own to pursue my degree. A worn picture of Mom resided in my wallet, and memories of

her surfaced now and then. I escaped from this vicious train of thoughts, took a deep breath to steady myself, and checked my watch. 18:55. If everything was on schedule, I should be arriving in an hour. I arrived a little bit late and threw myself on the bed without unpacking my things. Even though I had spent most of the time sleeping on the bus, I still felt exhausted. I fought back my desire to sleep and took a bath. I would never be able to sleep if my body felt itchy and sticky. I wore a plain white t-shirt and boxers before finally going to bed.

The next day, I spent my time grocery shopping. This is a habit I developed in my teenage years. Grandma was too old to buy our necessities, so I volunteered to help. She often gave me a list, which made it easier for me to remember. The good thing was that nowadays I didn't even need a note when I went to the supermarket. A motorcycle was a fancy thing that I didn't have, so I had to walk for about 15 minutes to the supermarket. As usual, the place was crammed with people and their carts. I loved being in a supermarket. The way they arranged the products systematically, how the color mixed with each other in harmony, how the price was printed in black on yellow paper, how the discounted items price tag was enormous and eye-catching, and triggering my senses with thoughts of how it tasted or what it felt somehow gave me a sense of relaxation. I grabbed and put the items in my cart efficiently. My muscle memory was trained at this point. I picked up shampoo with a mint scent, soap with a citrus scent, I still had my toothpaste left, no need to buy a shaving kit because my mustache was growing at a slow pace, or perfume because it smelled awful and unnatural to me, women's deodorant because I sweat a lot and it had a softer scent, smelled two tissue packs, and moisture absorber for my clothes, and . Moving to the food section, I filled my cart with fruits like Sunpride Cavendish bananas, Fuji

apples, and once again something that had a sour taste, Sunkist oranges. Acidity was my drug. My shopping cart was almost full. Sometimes, I stopped to check whether there was another item that had more value or had a discount tag. I kept telling myself to stop buying anything unnecessary. After making sure all was covered, I waited in line. I rejected any kind of offer from the supermarket and paid. Plastic usage was forbidden, so I used a cardboard box to carry my groceries. When I was halfway on my way home, I just realized I forgot to buy insect spray. I hate mosquitoes. It wasn't because of the disease they would bring, but the sound they produced at night which made me insane. So, when I still remembered, I went to a kiosk nearby to buy it.

I unloaded my pack and put everything where it belonged. My chores were finished precisely at noon when the call to prayer sounded. With not much else to do and barely a week before the new semester started, I planned to spend the rest of my days reading a book. I was not much of a reader, but I mostly enjoyed fiction novels and generally disliked autobiographies. Autobiographies, to me, felt dry and lack imagination, and I wasn't easily swayed by fancy quotes or inspirational background stories. I also hated how the writers seem to boast about their struggles and achievements. The novel I was currently reading was "Holes" by Louis Sachar. I bought it at a thrift shop near Beringharjo market. While judging a book by its cover wasn't ideal, I somehow had a knack for guessing whether a book is worth reading. As expected, "Holes" was good. The writer blended comedy and irony seamlessly into the storyline. It told the story of Stanley Yelnats IV, a bullied kid who had been accused of stealing Clyde Livingston's shoes, a pro basketball player, for charity. Despite being thrown into juvenile jail, he was transferred to Camp Green Lake. Unlike its name, the place was actually

barren and devoid of water. The juvenile was forced by the warden to dig a hole every day in search of a secret treasure left by Kate Barlow. In the end, Stanley was cleared of the charges and felt grateful for the experience because the horrible treatment and the ordeal he endured at Camp Green Lake giving him valuable lessons. This was the reason why I hate a masterpiece. Reading a good book was both a joy and a burden. I savor every chapter, every twist and turn, until I reluctantly reach the final page. I would always feel empty afterwards. I lost a sense of purpose. It was like reaching the end of a cave with the goal of finding diamonds, only to realize the journey itself was the prize all along. The diamonds in your hand held no value compared to every conversation with a person you met by chance on the road, every laugh and tear, every sleepless night, and every tragedy that shaped your experience. Looking back, all that remained was a deserted track of your past. You asked yourself why you wanted to find diamonds in the first place. Was it greed, or was it something forced upon you? While you were regretting your past, your present continuously shattered into fragments of the past, and your future replayed itself. It was like an infinite loop, a vicious cycle that would never end: a paradoxical realm. Before you realized what had happened, time was up. Regret was all you knew in your past, present, and future. It was scary, wasn't it?

## Chapter 2

Living in a dormitory had its own perks and challenges. On the positive side, if you paid your monthly allowance, you only had to take care of your own room, whether it was like a shipwreck, a battlefield, a pigsty or a girl's room. It didn't matter if you hadn't changed your sheets for months, used beer cans as ashtrays, threw every piece of garbage under your bed, or simply put a naked women poster on your wall, as long as you didn't disturb the other tenants, you would be okay. Home sweet home. However, the shared facilities like kitchen and toilet became everyone's responsibility, and that was where the problems often occurred. Starting from the disappearance of plates and mugs in the cupboard, followed by foods and beverages in the fridge, tensions began to arise among the roommates. The owner said this had never happened before and the culprit was among the twelve of us. Since that day, there was an unspoken rule that if you put your food in the fridge, it belonged to everyone—or you could say, to the thief. The thief wasn't picky about with what they would steal: whether it was a chocolate cake, a dozen of eggs, or a just a bottle of ketchup. It wasn't only the work of a prankster or big eater. They weren't doing it for the value, they were doing it to fulfill their irresistible urge to steal others' personal belonging: in others word, a kleptomania. In this case, we couldn't trust anyone, not even our friendly neighbor. The fridge ran twenty-four hours a day, but no one dared to store their meals in it. We

would keep everything the food to ourselves, watching it rot rather than giving it away as a free commodity to that bastard. The act of theft was only the beginning. It wasn't as bad as the floating shit. It wasn't UFOs or birds we were talking about. It was actual shit that was floating in the water. Someone must have deliberately left their shit intact without bothering to flush. At first, we thought it was because the water pump wasn't working. With the broken pump rampant, we had to seek refuge by using nearby public facilities such as mosques and minimarkets for necessities like urinating, defecating, and bathing. So, it was still logical and acceptable if someone was in a hurry that he couldn't hold the urge to take a dump due to the circumstances. Soon, everyone realized that wasn't the case. Like the kitchen problem, the issues persisted for months. The owner was furious. He must have thought being house taker was an easy job. He thought he only needed to collect the payments and called a handyman if something was broken, but he was wrong. He took the precaution by knocking each of our doors and reprimanding us every time the incident with the shit occurred. It made the culprit a bit scared. The incidents stopped for a moment. Just when we thought the problem was over and everyone wasn't on their guard, it resurfaced unexpectedly. One or two tenants were even left the place before their lease ended just because of the mysterious pooper. Because threatening words and warnings weren't enough to deter the perpetrator, the owner installed a CCTV as an extreme measure. It worked. No one ever dared to do that again because you would only get caught red-handed. Imagine having installed a high budget security camera, not to caught a thief, but just to catch a human in the act of excretion. The issues seemed resolved, but I was one hundred percent sure another bizarre trouble would come after this.

The sun dipped below the horizon, painting the sky with streaks of orange and purple as stars began to twinkle. I was in the middle of the movie on my laptop when someone yelled my name from outside my room. His voice wasn't audible the first time he called because I was using my cheap earphones. He was one of my housemates. Fun fact, we were enrolled in the same elementary school, but he was a year ahead. We hadn't knew each other or been in touch for several years, especially after I started living with my grandma in the fourth grade. When I first moved out here, he was the first neighbor to say hi to me. We talked for a few days before he noticed something about me. I surprised that we actually knew each other. His name was Restu. He was actually in the same batch as me, but he took the acceleration class, putting him one year above me. Restu's face was stern, a sharp jawline, broad shoulders made him tower over me by several inches. Despite his tendency to brag, he turned out to be a genuinely respectful and funny guy. He was also straight as an arrow. He prayed five times a day, religiously observing his faith. Sometimes, he'd even squeeze in an extra prayer or two. Our friendships worked in a mysterious way. It wasn't solely on how nice he was or because he was my old friend. It was the common interest and hobbies we shared. Sports was the main thing. He did have some quirks, though. For instance, he did his own laundry but unwilling to iron his own shirts, believing it to be a waste of time. As long as his quirks were harmless, I didn't mind. He just came back from his hometown with his towering hiking backpack and a fresh bald cut. It was like a ritual. I asked him and he said long hair brought him bad luck. I thought it was because his father was in the military corps. Still with his bag on his shoulder, without coming back to his room, he greeted me

with a cigarette in his mouth. He never put his cigarette in his hand while smoking. It was like he talked and breathed with puff flowing in and out through his lungs. I personally dislike smoking. I tried it several times and it just didn't click. I experienced nausea and wanted to vomit anytime I smoked. The blood rebelled against the existence of nicotine in my vein. My brain sent an alert to all the antibodies to get rid of the toxic stuff. He finished talking, went to his room, and came back, standing at the door.

"Want to go for a night ride?" He asked me while typing something on his phone.

I couldn't say no since I had a lot of free time on my hands. The destination was the same as ever: the outskirts of town, where we used to go when one of us had a knot in our chest. A cliff called Bukit Bintang. We put on jackets and set off. The sky was clear without any clouds, with one small, little rounded piece of moon hanging there. Red, yellow, and white lights complemented without making another faint. With his 250cc black motorcycle, we plunged into the swarm of vehicles, weaving between cars and big buses. We were getting far away from the heart of the city with its multi-story buildings and blinding lights on Laksda Adisucipto street. Things were shorter and streets were darker and less noisy after we crossed the Janti Flyover. We made it to the place. This was the spot where we could see the city from above. From here, all those things looked like miniatures. We just sat at the edge of the cliff. Restu lit his cigar, taking a long breath as if thinking where to start the talk .

"Is it about your girlfriend again?" I initiated the conversation.

"It's actually my younger sister. Did you know I have a pretty little sister?"



“Oh, you never talked about her so how do I know?”

He just smiled at my response. I was shocked by his words because I thought he was the only child in his family.

“That’s not the main point actually. I’m telling you this because starting next week, I won’t be living under the same roof as you.”

“Because of your sister?”

“I guess so. She just graduated this year and my parents have just bought us a house for us to live together.”

“Man, congrats then. Now you don’t have to live in that dilapidated shack anymore. You should be happy. Instead, what’s with the long face?”

“No matter how tough I act, when it comes to my sister, I become soft. I love my sister and I worry about her every single day. Even when we were apart” he gazed at the sky intently. “It’s gonna be a long story, you still wanna hear it?”

“I’m okay with it.”

I fixed my sitting position so I won’t sleep. It wasn’t because I expected something boring. It was just that I wasn’t accustomed to being awake at this hour. When he said it would be a long story, I never imagined it would be this long. Restu never talked this much with so many emotions involved. I came to a conclusion and would shorten the story. He and his sister had been abused by their father. It was a common occurrence in their family. The sad thing was, their mother couldn’t do anything about his husband’s wrongdoings. She, in fact, cared and loved them. It was the true nature of a mother to their flesh bloods, yet she didn’t have the power to oppose her own husband. It was also a dilemma for her. She had to protect her husband’s reputation as a high-ranking military officer. Patriarchies in the old days were very common. Husbands expected their wives to obey them without questioning. The

housewives were at a clear disadvantage. Most of the time, the decisions were made by the head of the household without involving others' interests. Whenever their father was on duty far away from home, it was like a short escape for them. I didn't know much about parenting, but locking your children in the toilet all night and leaving marks on their body were certainly unjustified, even if their parents' background were military. Suffering hardships for a long time, he and her sister developed opposite personalities. My friend, Restu, was very good at hiding his own emotions except when he talked about his girlfriend. He would tell stories as if he was the third person or a news reporter on TV, leaving behind his own true feelings discreet to others. He was a social butterfly and everyone seemed to like him. When he felt like being left alone, he never said anything and just went somewhere for days without telling anybody. He came back as if nothing had happened before. If someone asked him what happened, he would pretend to be okay and say everything was under control. The tortures he received from his dad making him mentally tough. On the other hand, her sister was a total opposite of his personality. She was easily upset, very clingy, and unable to stand on her own feet. It wasn't a simple adolescent delinquency, it depicted sadness, loneliness, and emptiness. She suffered from an unfulfilling childhood and traumatic experiences, leaving her confused. Sometimes she felt alone on her own, but sometimes she also felt a kind of solitude. Instead of someone, she found 'something' as a replacement. Bad things that acted as a quick release. It would make her feel numb rather than make her better, offering her temporary joy by inducing dopamine release in your brain for a short time span. She was growing distant from herself and finally felt lost, nowhere to go. It was like drowning, hoping someone would notice. She couldn't cry out

for help as the water threatened to fill her body, suffocating her. Like what Lennon said, we needed someone to save us from those dark period. Night was getting chillier and quieter. The owl ceased its hooting, and crickets grew tired of chirping. Rarely any other vehicle crossed the street. The story stopped there. I didn't give my opinion about his story. We were silent, gazing at the scenery. From the vantage point above, the trees' foliage below formed a vibrant carpet of green below. It wasn't like we had nothing to talk about anymore. I just need time to process information that was given to me. He stood up, breaking the silence with a loud scream, causing a flock of birds to flutter from the trees.

"It's getting late. Let's go back. Thank you by the way for listening to my jokes." he gave me a sardonic smile.

"Maybe next time you should give me something in return." I laughed.

We came back downtown. Most of the population were on their bed, sleeping peacefully. Some people were still awake and the rest barely woke up. Their jobs started at night. People unloaded the goods from their pickup trucks. Most of them were fruits and vegetables. We arrived safely at home and went back to our respective rooms, each minding our own business. I couldn't sleep that night. The story he told still haunted my mind. As someone who never had a sibling, I didn't know exactly how it felt to have them. Would you grow some affection towards them because you grew up together or was it because you know you shared the same womb, so there was a certain connection linked between you? Didn't things get awkward when you and your sister reached a certain age, especially when you had a wet dream and your sister started a period. Were we able to freely express our affection in that situation without any boundaries?

## Chapter 3

Starting from this week, I had to attend my classes. My classes were mostly in the morning, so I could spend the rest of my days somewhere else. The annoying alarm woke me up. I cracked the bones from my stiff body, turned on the light, drank a glass of water, and went to the bathroom. I dressed up and after everything was set, I locked the door and left my rented room early to avoid a traffic jam, although I went to the campus by walking. Hearing multiple engines and inhaling gas emissions from vehicles would disrupt my solitude. I opened the door and found no one in the class. I put my bag down, sat on the shabby wooden chair, arranged my notebook, calculator, and pen on the table, and finally, found myself gazing at the old school green chalkboard. I tried to empty my mind from thinking about anything at all. I treated myself like a computer who just barely turned on and proceeded with the necessary apps to run in the background so it wouldn't disturb the main application. This was the kind of meditation I needed to gather focus so I could absorb the matter efficiently. One by one the students arrived, filling the empty spot randomly. The first row was often empty, except for those who were diligent and ready enough to answer the question and interact with the lecture like Plato and his students in the old Greek era. Observing people was also my routine before the class started. The first one who came after me was a man wearing the classic black and red lumberjack checkered flannel. It's the most

common outfit for us as engineering students. The second one was a woman wearing a plain long skirt and a batik shirt. It looked modest but suits her well, made her look simple and gorgeous with a light touch of concealer. I lost count after that because they entered the room in a group of people. Most of them wore their organization jackets to identify or distinguish themselves. It was past 5 minutes from the schedule when the lecturer arrived. Everyone became silent, looking at the lecturer who was still busy setting up the laptop. The class went well. I understood most of the lesson, and at the end of the class, the lecturer gave us homework to do. I packed my things and left first.

I waited at the parking lot near the security post. I'd already made a promise to Restu to help him move out and fetched me up at 10. From far away, I could hear the particular car engine that he was driving. He came by with a blue pickup truck full of his cardboard boxes and other big things. People around were looking at the car because it attracted attention with its load or maybe because of the sticker glued to the windshield with a tinge of yellow that said 'urip iku urup', a Javanese expression which meant life is like flame or in simple terms, we have to be supportive and helpful to others. It would be a tedious job moving his belongings with only a normal car since he owned a lot of things.

"You packed your things already?" I asked.

"Yeah, I don't have anything to do this morning so it would be faster if I started first."

"Ladies first." Restu opened the door for me as if I was the princess.

I hopped in, sitting on the patched synthetic skin coated seat. The car was old but it was clean enough as a rented pickup car. Despite its cleanliness, It still reeked of suntanned

leather material of the car and cigarette ashes. There was a plastic-marble-like tasbih hanging on the rear mirror. Left hand on the clutch and right hand on the steering wheel, Restu stepped on the gas and went off to his new home. Today was a sunny day. The bright light tickled our skins with its warmth and the gentle wind blowing through the open window. The traffic was smooth because it wasn't lunch hour yet. We're on the kaliurang street, heading north to the soaring Merapi Mountain. The last time Merapi had its terrifying volcanic eruption was 4 years ago. Legend has it, based on its statistics, that every four years, the mountain would show activity and this year should be the time we expect something would happen and we have to be prepared to minimize the destruction and death toll. Restu told me not to worry because his house was still considered a safe zone.

We turned left to the main road and entered a high-class neighborhood past a security gate as the sole access to the residential area. I wonder what his house looked like because the other houses were impressive. Restu partially disclosed the truth. If he wanted to give the impression of being down-to-earth, at least you didn't have to say that his house was the same house we usually found on the street. This was a modern house I often built as a kid in 'The Sims' game. His house was vast and lavish, with an industrial-theme finishing touch. It was multiple times bigger than mine. No wonder, considering his father's wealth and fame, owning a property like this was a piece of cake. We untangled the rope and worked together unloading his belongings. Hiking tools, ergonomic chair, working table, study lamp with yellow incandescent lamp installed in it, cardboard boxes with his clothes and other small items, and lastly his big drawer. We managed to move everything off the pickup truck and now the main thing was to

move them into the house. He unlocked the varnished teak double door, revealing us the main interior of the house. Jade green paint adorned the wall. A chandelier hung from the ceiling. Several items had also been installed in the living room. an L-shaped brown leather sofa with an IKEA glass coffee table resting on a Turkish carpet, medium size potted artificial monstera, and a floor lamp. We had to be careful carrying the objects to his bedroom and not to bump into the furniture. It only took two hours to finish and clean the place. Leaning against the wall, we treated ourselves with a 1.5-liter coke bottle, tossing our glasses as if we were drinking old wine. He told me to go back now and come back at night. Her sister would be coming today and he had to pick her up at the Adisucitjipto International Airport in an hour. He tossed the key and slung a towel over his shoulder walking his way to the bathroom. I stood up and headed back to my place with the motorcycle that he lent me.

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I showed up wearing a black hoodie and khaki chino pants. I used a watch to ensure I looked neat. I knocked at the door three times and waited. There was no response. I counted to ten before knocking again when the abrupt sound of the key dangling was heard. Someone opened the door and it wasn't Restu. She was no other than his little sister. She didn't look like her brother, but I could see the resemblance. She was a petite girl and as white as snow, a head shorter than me, her hair was colored an unnatural ash brown, and the first thing I noticed from her facial features was her downturned eyes. I wasn't sure whether her eyeballs were bigger than normal size or it was because of the extremely thick, round lenses attached to the thin frame she wore. Her nose was narrow with freckles glittered around it and her lips were plump. She was wearing a

Joy Division Unknown Pleasure cover T-shirt, washed blue jeans, and an inverted cross pendant draped elegantly around her neck, which symbolize Satanism. She didn't greet me and just left as soon as I said hi to her. What a rude person, I thought. I stood there until suddenly Restu wearing an apron appeared from the backside of the house and he gestured for me to follow him to the kitchen section. I nodded, took off my shoes, and went inside.

"She is pretty, isn't she?"

"I think so." I replied brusquely.

"Of course, she's pretty. I'm handsome and my sister should be gorgeous. Anyway, you like her?"

"Whoa, whoa, whoa, take it easy, will you? I've just met her."

"Forget there's something called love at first sight?"

"I do know about it, and the answer is, I don't."

"Oh c'mon, I know you pretty well. You can't hide it from me."

"Stop teasing me alright?" I playfully nudge him. In fact, he wasn't wrong. She was pretty and if you viewed this in terms of natural selection, normal male creatures would be attracted to her.

"Actually she's been engaged with the eldest son of my father's friend. It's like a tradition in our family, so don't get your hopes up."

"You bet."

Restu laughed while working on his cooking. From what I could see, he'd already prepared diced tomatoes and onions, minced beef, grated cheese, and other ingredients, which I had no idea what their names were. The items neatly arranged on the bowls scattered around the counter.

"Spaghetti?" I guessed.



“Why did you ask? It’s obvious. You should ask whether it’s carbonara or bolognese.” He made fun of me while pouring the pasta into the boiling hot water. “What’s wrong with you? Don’t say it’s because of my sis?”

I was tired of unceasingly teasing so I just sighed. Restu finally assigned me to bring the beverages and snacks to the dining room. I brought them onto the table where his sister sat. She was busy on her phone. I wanted to avoid the awkwardness of being there alone with her, so I quickly left. I came back to the kitchen, watching him. Everything was all set and we put the food on the table. We sat together at the dining table. Restu started the conversation, introduced me to his sister, and led the prayer before we dug into the food. So, her name was Bumi. The smells of the bolognese sauce wafted through the air. I could already imagine the taste of the food before it tickled my tongue. The sourness of the tomatoes, the spiciness of the onions and black peppers, and the greased and juicy meat stimulated my salivary glands, making my appetite soar. Without a second to waste, I ate our food. The only one who didn’t seem to enjoy the food was Bumi. Her right hand was grasping a fork, while her left hand was surfing on the internet. I couldn’t care less because the food was really tasty. She finished her dinner last, gulping a glass of orange juice before immediately retreating to her room.

“Ahem, she’s just having her period. Please excuse her behavior.”

“Don’t mind me.”

Restu wanted to smoke, so we went upstairs to the terrace on the second floor adjacent to his room. We perched on the railing, gazing at nothing in particular. We were speechless and enjoyed the moment because things like this wouldn’t last forever.

## Chapter 4

Today was a good day. I was feeling it. I had no dream, ate delicious soto lamongan for breakfast, the class was called off, and it was raining. The sky was cloudy and dull with irregular thunderstorms. It had been pouring down heavily and steadily for the past hours. Everything was in a darker shade. The clouds became more of a gray instead of white and the streets became closer to black instead of gray. The cold and the scent of the drenched soil still lingered in the air, evoking back nostalgia of nothing in particular. I was at a bus stop, waiting for a bus with route number 12 to bring me to Restu's place. He said he needed my help and would explain the details later. I turned down his offer to pick me up. I wanted to interact with people by being with them. Although we didn't communicate, being near them was enough for me. It was like they recognized my existence.

The bus finally arrived, opening the pneumatic door with a hiss. I waited for the previous passengers to leave first, paid the ticket fee with a member card, and got in. The bus was overflowing with tired looking people after a long commute, so I had to stand and hold onto the handle bar. Gripping the handle tightly, I tried my best to maintain my balance. The last thing I wanted was to bump into someone else and get accused of intentional harassment. The bus rarely moved . We were stuck during rush hour. Frustrated drivers gave multiple honks to get their way. It was so loud, even with the muffled sound.

Trapped in a sea of cars, tempers flared like exhaust pipes on a hot day, especially for those already burdened by a bad day at work. Even the rain couldn't cool down the heat.

Speaking of heat, my thoughts were shifted into thermodynamics. The teacher introduced to us in high school. It was a basic staple for engineering students to master the fundamental subject in order to understand the other advanced theories and overwhelming equations. The first and second laws of thermodynamics were formally stated around 1860 by German physicist Rudolf Clausius and Scottish physicist William Thomson. The third law, sometimes referred to as Nernst's Heat Theorem, was developed by German chemist Walther Nernst in the early 1900s. I couldn't help but mention their names out of respect. I easily memorized them all by drawing an analogy from the laws of thermodynamics to the state of human consciousness. The first law of thermodynamics stated that energy was conserved. In simpler terms, energy couldn't be created nor destroyed: it could only be converted from one form to another. The principle of conservation could also be seen in the realm of emotions. Humans were born with innate emotions. Emotions that were constantly changing in their lifetime and sometimes they changed shapes in the blink of an eye. For instance, love turned into hate, sad turned into anger, and overwhelmed turned into emptiness. In my condition, I realized I was not losing my sense of emotions. It had been transformed to something else. The indifferent, detached, lack of empathy, and coldness disposition I had developed all these years was a product of multiple alterations. The second law of thermodynamics described the behavior of energy and entropy in natural processes. I wanted to discuss entropy in particular, even though there were so many other things to discuss like the irreversibility and efficiency of engines.

Entropy tended to increase overtime towards greater chaos and randomness. It became more uncertain and unpredictable. As for us, human beings, we were getting more sophisticated as we grew older. We learned something new everyday exponentially. Until at some point of your life, you would reach the state where you were actually still developing but if you took a look at the line, the gradient was near zero or in other words, it was near its equilibrium. Questions left untouched without answers. The experience left us anxious and disoriented. If we, as human beings, understood the concept of entropy, maybe we could understand the complexities of the world, especially our existences. God didn't play dice. We had purposes in life and the only thing we had to do was being on track and navigate the journey. The third law of thermodynamics completed the set. The entropy of a system at absolute zero temperature was exactly equal to zero. Without any driving force, we would go nowhere, and the universe would meet their demise. It was the same as riding a bike, we just had to keep moving to avoid falling down.

While I was daydreaming about thermodynamics, the bus conductor announced that we were arriving at the nearest bus transit. I got a hold of myself and crept near the exit. The bus stopped and I got off. No passengers waiting on the platform. The rain had stopped completely. I walked carefully, evading the accumulated pool of rainwater, nearly 1 kilometer before I arrived. I checked my phone. Restu said he had something urgent to deal with, at least he left the door open for me to wait. I knocked and excused myself inside. One month had passed since he and her sister moved here. I noticed several new items that had been installed while I wasn't here. A surrealist painting, consisting of crimson red, cobalt blue, and jet black, adorned the jade green wall. It portrayed a fear and a secret that was

hidden within the delicate work. The second prominent thing I noticed was a Yamaha C135 guitar with a capo attached to its head near the sofa where I sat. It was in good shape without a single dent to be seen. I didn't know Restu was getting serious about music. Last year, he persistently nagged me to teach him how to play guitar just to impress the girl he liked. After two weeks of intense learning, he quit and told me he was not into her anymore. Maybe, right now he had someone on his mind or it was just simply he wanted to learn. Personally, learning music wasn't too hard. I was a gifted and self-taught musician. I wasn't a genius or pitch perfect. When I wanted to learn something, I started with the basics. In this case it was the scale. The most common scale was heptatonic. For instance, if you started with C, you would play the major scale, which consists of seven notes: C, D, E, F, G, A, and B. Those notes were repeated endlessly, spanning across higher octaves or descending into lower octaves, creating a sense of continuity and expansion. With the same notions, I could grasp other scales.

Playing his guitar wouldn't hurt in this peaceful gloomy, afternoon. Restu wouldn't be mad at me just because I borrowed his guitar without his permission. I grabbed the guitar, turned the tuning pages to produce the correct pitches for every string, and started strumming a chord. I stopped a little bit, thinking what song should I sing. I decided to recite Don't Cry by Guns N' Roses, one of my favorite songs and bands of all time. While recent music had its merits, it couldn't quite compete with the golden era of dad music. Of course, I was biased because my grandma used to be a die-hard rock fan and collected tapes from the west. I played three more songs in order: "Champagne Supernova" by Oasis, "People Are Strange" by The Doors, and "Michelle" by the Beatles. Lost in

the melody of the guitar, I was oblivious to someone observing behind me. When the strings of the guitar ceased to vibrate, she broke the silence with her discreet clap. She was still half-asleep, not wearing makeup. Her hair was unruly and her pajamas were wrinkled.

“Can you teach me?” Bumi asked me curtly.

“Uh, okay? Did I make you awake?” It was so sudden I didn’t know how to respond properly. It was also the first time she talked to me.

“Is it difficult?” She asked, ignoring my concern.

“Not really if you are willing to learn.”

She plopped down next to me, staring intently at my hands.

“You have nimble fingers as a boy.”

“Oh, really? I’ve never thought about it.”

“Play something.”

Let’s just recite The Beatles again. She should know, would she? The Beatles were the most popular and influential band of all time. When I was just placing my right hand on the strings to play the intro of “Blackbird”, She shook her head.

“Another one.” She remained stoic.

The way she conveyed her wish would make some people offended. I wasn’t one of them. Superficial charm was not essential in my social dictionary.

“Do you have anything on your mind?”

“Forget Jakarta. I miss my friends.”

I might not be a fan of 2010s music, but the funny thing was, from thousands of songs that were produced lately, I knew this song pretty well. I stumbled upon this song while I was listening to the radio. The song was simple. It was an intimate bedroom recording in Adelaide, consisting of the guitar’s gentle strumming and Adhitia Sofyan’s soothing voice. Jakarta was a

part of me, a part of childhood. It was flawless with its imperfections. The busy metropolitan city never slept, bustling from day to night. The straightforward and temperamental people, the flood, the traffic, the social disparity, the mass demonstration, the pollution—everything was impeccable.

I began to play and didn't expect her to sing. Bumi's soft voice was slightly out of tune, but it was unique and beautiful in her own way. It brought out her personality. We reached the chorus and I barely noticed her eyes were closed. Her head tilted slightly upwards, as if she was recollecting her memories.

**'If you'll stay, then I'll will stay  
Even though the town's not what it used to be  
And pieces of your life you try to recognize  
All went down'**

We reached the end of the chorus. Our soul was connected. She stopped singing, and so did I. A smile bloomed on her face.

"Thank you. That was fun." She said, her voice warm.

"Anytime."

"Your name was Rakha, right?"

"Rakha Thrisna, in case you wonder."

"You're not even Indian."

"You don't have to be one to bear such a name."

"Why did your parents name you that way then?"

Hadn't had a chance to reply, our conversation was disrupted by the suddenly opened door. Restu was back with a crackling plastic supermarket bag, the urgent matter he said he said earlier was a pack of Gold Marlboro and a mint breath freshener.

"Hey, you guys having fun without me? What a let down!"

I explained to him that we just sang a couple of songs before he came. He told me that was the intention he invited me to his place after all. The guitar was not his. It was hers. I apologized to her and she said it wasn't a problem. He planned to make me a private tutor for her beloved sister. He even told me that I would get paid based on hours we spent. Extra money meant I didn't have to use my inheritance money or asked my grandma if something unexpected happened to me. I immediately accepted the offer on a whim. I wasn't associated with any organization and got nothing to do on the weekend. I did some simple math. If I did this side job every weekend for several months, I could buy myself a brand-new pair of shoes. The soles of my shoes were already torn apart and it was a nightmare on rainy days. I could also send the rest to my grandma too. She might still have her pension money and it didn't affect her much, but it was an act of pious child. I hoped she would live long enough to see me happy before her time was up. We continued talking for a while and Bumi was back sealing her lips as if she was disconnected from the world. I was scheduled to come over next weekend and went home late that night.

I run into someone at the main gate. He sauntered past me with his mouth blabbering nonsense, a steaming rice bowl wrapped in a red plastic bag clutched carelessly under his arm. The previously empty room next door was already occupied by a new tenant. I hadn't had a chance to introduce myself to him. He was a short, brawny guy with a young Jackie Chan haircut, wearing thick frame glasses. He spent most of the time inside his crib with the door closed. I caught a glance of him only when he went out to take the delivery order or to the toilet. So, another hikikomori.



Hikikomori was a Japanese term for those who withdrew from social life and found it hard to establish a social bond, spending most of the time alone in their rooms. I had no objection living on the same roof with hikikomori as neighbors. The only complaint I had was that I often heard his voice at night. He giggled, screamed, and the most bizarre thing was I had to hear him moan. Waking up in the middle of the night was the most awful thing. I would awaken with a damp T-shirt, beads of sweat running profusely, especially on my back, accompanied by a dry throat, rapid heartbeat, and a throbbing temple, indicating feverishness. I had to get up, forcing myself to drink a glass of water, change my clothes, and wash my face to alleviate my uneasiness. I would stay awake all night: my head filled with endless thoughts until the bright morning sunlight penetrated my curtains. The next morning, he'd take his 2D bikini waifu pillow, the one with the vibrant colors, and hung it out to dry in the sunshine. There, visible to all, were yellow sticky blotches scattered on the lower part of the pillow. It was obvious enough: no further explanation needed. Oh my, How I envied them so much. I wanted to be like them. The people whom others thought of them as cringe. They indulge in their own world, their own isekai as their escape from the cruel world. Regardless of the stereotype that fell on them, they were genuinely happy to be themselves. They could carry on their lives with 'modern drugs' soaked through their brains. In other words, a philosophical suicide to escape the absurdity. Physical suicide was not an option either. I wasn't afraid of death. I was already dead inside. While mortals waged wars and immortals schemed and deceived, here I was, at the feet of a hill in Tartarus. There was a huge boulder standing in front of me like a formidable fortress, built by the pebbles of troubles I ignored. I couldn't even budge the rock an inch. My dear Sisypheus, you

who outsmarted the gods only to find yourself condemned to this eternal task. Did you ever truly trick yourself into happiness? Pretending to accept the fact that life was basically absurd, which left some questions unanswered, and finding oneself was also not as easy as rolling a boulder, Camus. Perhaps Nietzsche's Übermensch, with his willpower, could carve a meaningful path on the endless route? Or should I be more stoic and practical like the former Roman emperor? Or should I slept on the road like Diogenes? Or should I have resigned to the fact that life was determined by the interaction between chemical activities in our brains, the biological activities in our organs, and the physical activities of the unconscious atoms that made us believe in the illusion of consciousness? The things we perceived through our senses, the emotions we felt inside, were just byproducts of the material world. We, in the first place, never chose for ourselves.

## Chapter 5

I was with Bumi, perching at the bar stools. Each had a bottle of beer. The condensation dripped down our hands, leaving trails of icy coolness. Here was how it began: It was the usual sunny Sunday morning, a great day for a jog. I donned my usual dry-tech workout clothes and stretched every muscle in my body, starting with my upper body (neck and shoulders) and then moving on to my lower body to loosen up my hamstrings and calves. I could feel the blood pumping and with a final deep breath, I embarked with a steady pace, taking a route from my place to the Tugu Golong Gilig, the iconic landmark of Jogjakarta as a turning point. I was not the only one running. There were many group of running and cycling groups. with their matching teams uniform on the road. The sweat quickly evaporated as soon as it was secreted out of my skin. Whenever I hit the road and my muscles twitched, my brain released the endorphins, causing my mood to kick in. I finished the route in mere ten minutes. I waited until my body cooled off before taking a cold shower. I still had plenty of time left to eat and prepare myself to work on my side job as a guitar instructor.

I had my fourth appointment with Bumi. Restu had a group project at his house with his colleagues who had been sleeping over for days, so I suggested Bumi could visit my place since it has its own sitting room. She left by a car and arrived on time with his guitar strapped to her back. She was wearing high-

waisted baggy olive pants, an oversized Iron Maiden official merchandise T-shirt, and a soldier-patterned bucket hat. The necklace was there. I led her to the sitting room. We sat on the bamboo seat, holding our guitars. I continued my lesson from last week. I instructed her to do the 'do-re-mi' fingerpicking exercise. She hit the notes, but wasn't clear enough. Still, I had to admit that she was a good pupil, learning at a fast pace for a beginner. I told her to relax her hands more when I realized the tip of her fingers were full of calluses. It was my oversight, I forgot she wasn't accustomed to steel strings. It also indicated that she practiced every single day. I suggested that we cancel the lesson and wait until her hand healed.

"I didn't want to go home." She rejected.

"Because of your brother's friends?" I knew exactly the reason but I just wanted to make sure.

"It's not just them. People, they ain't no good."

"Nick Cave and the Bad Seeds."

"So, you know."

"Mere coincidence."

"Whatever. I'm leaving."

Bumi wrapped her guitar, got back on her feet, and left without saying a word. I followed her walking toward the parking lot. She climbed into her blue sedan, ignited the engine, and lowered the side window. I stood there, blinded by the headlights.

"You coming or not?"

Well, I couldn't just leave her alone, could I? I owed her an hour's worth of lessons. It left me no choice but to join her and fasten the car seat belt. I was oblivious to where we were going. It seemed we were heading south based on the route she took. The night was still early and the street was full of people. No wonder, since it was Sunday night. We were in the

Prawirotaman vicinity, and she pulled her car in front of an aloha-themed bar across the street. We were welcomed by two tiki sculptures holding torches. As we entered the small bar, the faint sound of Japanese '80s City Pop music filled the cozy space. I found it quite enjoyable: since I couldn't understand the lyrics and the beat wasn't too catchy, the music wouldn't distract me. Several tables were occupied by groups of students and natives. Someone greeted us, likely Bumi, with his newly bleached pink crop hair, a nose ring, tight-fitting clothes, and confident swagger. He treated Bumi like a regular, and pulled up a chair at our table. They exchanged a few quick words before he leaned in and gave Bumi a friendly kiss on the cheek, then headed off. Here we were, in the present time, drinking our cheap beers.

"He's taking an interest in you." Bumi whispered.

"Oh, I'm not interested in men. I'm straight."

"Hey, careful. Watch your mouth in a public space like this. He identified himself as a lady. It's actually silly and nonsensical, but this is how you get along with people."

"Forget it. The main point is, is it okay for you to be in a place like this?" As far as I knew, Restu was very strict when it came to committing sins. I honestly couldn't care less about one's wrongdoing, but it became my concern when I got involved with them. I wasn't afraid of his brother: it's a matter of mutual respect.

"It's totally okay. My brother doesn't know."

"Goodness gracious, It's not okay at all! How should I face your brother if he finds out that I'm drinking with you." I seethed quietly. The news shocked me.

"As long as you keep this little secret between us, Saul Goodman."

"I'm not a good liar."

“Make sure he doesn’t ask.”

There was no end to arguing with her. She extracted a vape from her purse, turned it on, and took the first drag. It was cola flavor.

“Do you think I’m pretty?” She sought assurance.

“Why do you ask?”

“Hey, do not answer a question with another question. Don’t you know how to make a girl happy?”

I looked away and gazed at the bottles of alcoholic drinks arranged neatly on the shelves. Bumi emptied her third beer and ordered other strong stuff. As if she read my mind, she told me that she had a high tolerance for alcohol. Meanwhile, I stopped drinking after two or three shots. One of us should keep sober, and besides, Bumi was my responsibility.

“I just broke up with my boyfriend.”

“I’m so sorry. What about your engagement then?”

“Not with my fiancé, my boyfriend.”

“Of course I’m doing secretly, you silly.”

“Wait, so you have a fiancé and a boyfriend at the same time? What if they found out?”

“Of course I’m doing it secretly, you clever boy. Besides, it’s my father who engaged me without my consent.”

“How many secrets do you hide in that Pandora’s box of yours?” I was stunned.

“Turns out he’s actually cheating behind my back, and the whole ‘not believing in long-distance relationships’ was just a gimmick. We’d been together almost a year, ever since we met at the tutoring center while prepping for our university exams. Man, how ungrateful of him. He was dumber than the average ape. I had to teach him simple math and physics using baby words and he would not understand a single thing. To be frank, I wasn’t really into him. I really didn’t care who it was as long as

someone sincerely loved me. But what really hurts is finding out he cheated and moved on so quickly after we split."

She swirled the glass of Jägermeister, emptied the contents, and poured another drink. I asked the bartender to bring us a bowl of nuts to reduce the effect of alcohol.

"I was so furious. I called his number many times and he ignored all of them. He avoided me. When finally he answered the phone, I lost it. I cursed and yelled at him on the phone, calling him an idiot, douchebag, loser, coward, bastard, son-of-a-bitch, and other bad things I could think of, yet he was still silent. He treated me like this every time I brought up a topic. He didn't even shed a single tear. I haven't had a chance for revenge." She gulped her drink. "Ah, that hits the spot. Where was I? Oh, and I told him that someday he would regret his decision. He just left me on read. Yesterday, he just posted his photos of himself and her new girlfriend on Instagram. They looked happy. I feel sorry for the girl. One day she would be treated like a disposable battery and be dumped. Once you cheat, you will be a cheater all your life. It's like a deadly disease that has no cure at all. Government should ban all the cheaters from the country, castrate their genitals, impose a life imprisonment sentence in Nusakambangan, or even implement a death penalty, so people would think twice before cheating on someone. What a joke."

I could see her face was flushed red, indicating her high alcohol intake. Bumi kept jumping from one topic to another. From cats to doraemon, chickens to dinosaurs, Lü Bu to Genghis Khan.

"If a chicken ate a dinosaur nugget, it would be like eating a distant cousin. Maybe, a bit rude, but not quiet cannibalism because they're separated millions of years." She let out a stifled

chuckle at her own joke. I smiled because it was true and the way she laughed was funnier than the joke.

I chimed in occasionally to let her know that I was still listening. It's two a.m. already, and I was worried about what her brother might be saying about this matter. After talking like this for hours, she finally ran out of energy. I lightly tapped her shoulder. She was out. I decided to give her a piggyback ride back to the car. I placed her on the passenger seat and myself on the driver seat. I couldn't just drive her home in this condition. It was just us in the parking lot. As I drummed my fingers on the steering wheel, she suddenly opened the door and threw up. I caressed her back to help her feel better. She cleaned her mouth with a tissue and covered her eyes with her hand to prevent light entering her eyes. I told her to wait inside while I went to the mini market to buy her a bottle of water and a mung bean-filled bun to fill her stomach. I came back and found her regaining her composure. I gave her the items and she gobbled both right away.

"Thank you."

"You feeling better?"

"Sir, yes sir!" She saluted me. I couldn't help but laugh. It was funnier because she still wore her soldier-patterned bucket head, making her look like a recruit.

"I never thought you could speak more than one hundred words a day. You seems like a person who avoids long conversation."

"Oiran shouldn't talk with peasants. Booze makes me forget my manner, I become something less than I am then. Now would you kiss me? I'm just a lonely silly girl who only seeks attention and has nothing in mind beside romantic scenes I watched from corny B-movie. "

"I'll pass. I would do it if you're still in your oiran form."



“Your loss. No one ever touch my lips before.”

“Neither mine.”

A light drizzle started to fall, quickly turning into a heavy rain. The downpour on the roof and the window echoed the loud thump in a relentless rhythm. She turned on the radio with the volume barely audible.

I checked the digital watch on the car. The green illuminated numbers displayed half past three. Like last time, she read my body languages.

“I told my brother I slept over at my friend’s place. It’s also raining so It’s not safe to drive this late.”

“Couldn’t agree more.”

“Have you ever heard about ‘Three Faces of Self’.”

“I would love to hear.” I actually know, but I wanted to know what was inside her mind.

“You know, that idea from Japan?” She adjusted her sitting position. “It’s all about understanding people’s inner selves. Tateshita, or facade, is the mask you wear in public. You follow the social norms to please everyone and avoid causing trouble. Honne, or inner feelings, is the mask you wear to your family and friends. You loose your guard a bit, but you still hold a secret that you don’t want everyone to know. Tatemaie no Honne, the third face, is the dark side you never show to anyone. Personal opinions, emotions, and desires that you kept all alone to yourself. Do you want to know why the world would never be in peace and repeat the same mistakes throughout human history?”

She shifted her gaze to my eyes. Her shining black pearl-like eyes were attempting to break the barrier I had erected against people.

“I have no idea.” I looked away repeatedly. Women could be quite scary.

“Because humans continuously wear the wrong mask at the wrong time. Humans weren’t created to hide their true color. The real question I want to ask to you is, which one are you wearing right now?”

I was silent.

“You don’t have to answer if you want to.”

“Just a minute.” it took me a while to answer the question. “When I thought about what mask I was wearing, I noticed that I didn’t want to be judged by you. Unconsciously, I prepared an answer that normal people would say. So, I guess I’m wearing tateshita right now.”

“Make sure you don’t mix your masks anymore.” She smiled at me contentedly with her eyes closed.

It marked the end of our conversation. The rain was still pouring hard, and the only visible thing in the darkness of the town was the bar’s violet neon sign. The radio was playing “Weird Fishes/Arpeggi” by Radiohead at a low volume. After the song ended, I’d just realized it was a customized sound system. No wonder the drum parts were so bold and the bass parts were prominent throughout the song. The sound insulation was also great, almost close to nearly adiabatic process, where the song inside couldn’t escape and the rain outside muffled drastically. The vibe would be ideal for a love couple, but unfortunately not for us. I wouldn’t be her white knight only because I was there by chance when her kingdom was raided and her precious crown was stolen. I watched her intently. Her breath was so subtle, and she hugged herself tight. I turned off the air conditioner and wrapped my corduroy jacket around her. Thinking how much burden she held and how lonely she was reminded me of my mom. I knew the fact I was no one to her, but at least I could be a good friend to my best friend’s little sister.

## Chapter 6

**B**umi finally convinced me it was safe for her to head back alone. By then, it was well past five as she dropped me off at home. The hangover I had from last night forced me to skip classes. With a tight schedule looming, I grabbed some sleep, only to be jolted awake by the realization that I had two precious hours left before my laboratory practicum began. A throbbing head pounded in my skull as I forced myself to take a cold shower, wolfed down a slice of yesterday's bread, and raced to campus.

Clad in my lab coat, goggles, and tight gloves, I hurried towards the lab, a stark contrast to the throbbing in my head, where everyone else seemed focused and prepared. The friendly lab assistant reviewed safety procedures, delivering dos and don'ts, the fire triangle, and a diamond-shaped symbol that uses color codes to communicate health hazards in blue, flammability in red, reactivity in yellow, and specific hazards in white. Finally, off we went, dispersed at our own stations, each engrossed in their research. Compared to other topics like density measurement and gravimetric analysis, I found research on buffer solutions to be relatively straightforward. My experiment involved a buffer solution prepared with acetic acid and sodium acetate in multiple Erlenmeyer flasks. To monitor pH changes, I introduced phenolphthalein and methyl orange as indicators. Phenolphthalein would turn pink if the pH exceeded 8.3, signifying a shift towards a basic state. Conversely,

methyl orange would turn yellow for a pH below 4.4, indicating an acidic shift. I then proceeded with the titration. After attaching the clamp to the burette, I began adding the titrant (either sodium hydroxide or hydrochloric acid) a single drop at a time by carefully opening the valve. This allowed me to observe the solution's color changes, which served as an indicator of the ongoing chemical reactions and the buffer's capacity to resist pH alterations. After gathering the data I needed, I called the lab assistant to check if my data was valid and the tools I was using were in a good condition. He approved my work, so I proceed to clean my station, dispose of my gloves, fold my lab coat, and leave the lab early.

I went home, cleaned myself, and when I wanted to continue sleeping, I just remembered I arranged a meeting with him. To prevent myself from falling asleep, I dragged myself to burjo nearby and ordered a cheap instant black coffee. I knew that seventy percent of the sachet's content was corn. I doubted the caffeine would be strong enough to keep me awake, but at least I hoped to experience the placebo effect from it. Restu pulled up on his motorcycle, engine idling impatiently. I hopped on the back, and we shot off towards the angkringan near Tugu train station. I didn't know what got into him, but he was very reckless and nearly hit another rider.

"Watch your eyes, Goddammit!" the rider said angrily.

"Dickhead!" Bumi mocked, even though it was his fault.

The rumble of cars crossing the bridge, the mournful whistle of a passing train, and the gentle gurgle of the nearby Code River resonated through the air, producing a melody that spoke of both bustling life and peaceful serenity. The sky was gray and blurry above. The emissions polluted the clarity of the sky. Since it was self service restaurant, I seized two portions of nasi kucing, a glistening skewer of quail egg satay, and a few

gorengan. My friend ordered something similar. We sat on the carpet and dug into our food. A heavily tattooed figure, his nose and ears adorned with piercings, captivated the crowd with a street performance. While he performed "Terlalu Manis" by Slank, his companion, a woman with a shock of bright green hair, weaved through the crowd, a dented tin can clutched in her hand.

As we were getting near to finishing our plates, something struck my mind. Wait a minute, what if he already knew about what his sister was doing behind his back? But he made the appointment with me before it happened, right? While I gulped down my jasmine ice tea, he lit a cigarette. I noticed it was not the usual product he usually consumed.

"Ayu," she was Restu's girlfriend. "she wanted to break up with me." He puffed the smoke into the sky.

"Again?" I wasn't startled by his confession. It had happened so many times before that I lost count of it. "What's the reason this time?"

"She claimed I didn't give her enough attention," he said, crushing the cigarette butt beneath his shoe. "What could I say?"

I nodded in agreement.

"Third year is harsh. They weren't kidding," he continued. "I didn't even have time for my own sister when she needed me the most. Fuck!" he exclaimed.

"Have you tried telling her what's going on?"

He sighed, his emotions finally under control. "I tried everything, man, everything..." Defeat hung heavy in his voice. "I mimic everything she does: reading the same books, watching the same shows, listening to the same music, even down to the food I order. It's like I'm living in a reflection of her life. Maybe it's a bit obsessive, but I do it to keep the conversation flowing. I

begged for forgiveness, wrote her poems and love letters, showered her with flowers. I even surprised her with the silver necklace she'd been hinting at for her birthday present, even though it wasn't her birthday yet. I traveled hundreds of kilometers, crossing islands just to wait outside her house, looking like a beggar on the corner of the street. One day I was sweltering under the scorching sun, another shivering in a downpour. The worst part? It rarely works. Most of the time, it won't. I'll always be the wrong guy in her eyes. This 'playing hard to get' game is out of control. She just won't listen. She never understands me. She never will. If only she would listen to me, life would be easier." his voice thick with frustration."Maybe it would be easier if I let her go."

I couldn't offer him words of wisdom because love and its intricacies were a closed book to me. Love was the unspoken language which I didn't speak, a symphony of emotions that played out in a key I couldn't hear. I was a good listener, not a counselor. I could dissect metaphors and navigate problems with a logical map, but feelings? Those were uncharted territories for me. Fall in love wasn't logical in the first place, and I was glad he didn't need bullshit crap or cold logic. He just needed the right person to talk to, someone who could listen without judgment and offer a shoulder to lean on, not literally of course.

"I envy you." he admitted.

"Me? How?"

"I wonder why you never fall love."

"It's simple. I haven't just met someone I like."

"Are you kidding me? You're eighteen years old. How come you've never been interested in anyone, even a little bit? Or don't tell me that you're one of those rainbow flags?"

"Not a chance," I sniffed, but he seemed damn serious.

It was hard to tell him the fact that the thought of falling in love made me feel like throwing myself blindfolded on the edge of a cliff while hoping someone would catch me. Relying on someone else to validate your feelings was a dangerous thing. I used to believe in the warmth of love, but now here I am standing on my own, independent and self-assured. The mechanical schematic of my mind, once a comfort, now feels cold and sterile. The place was getting more deserted. People were leaving one by one until it was only the two of us, resting on a wall. I took a quick peek and saw his cigarettes were nearly empty. They were full when we arrived. He lit another one, and this time he coughed so hard that phlegm splattered on the floor. It was brown and sticky. The contrast between his concern for his sister and his own demeanor was striking. I felt concerned about his health, especially considering he had a heart condition. I felt some water drops from above, signaling the incoming rain. We were both tired, so we decided to call it a day. We got caught in the rain on our way home. Restu's frustration intensified he took off his helmet and shirt, riding half naked. I was crazy enough to follow him. We let the rain pierce our skin like meteor showers and just laugh about it. Two young wannabe adults were living their lives.

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Several days later, I received news from Restu that Bumi had a fever. I supposed it was because she drank too much alcohol that night. I felt guilty because of it. Restu had to leave for a field trip in East Java Today, so he asked me to look after Bumi for a while. I showed up at her house with some fruits I had bought nearby. I made sure the fruits were gentle on the stomach, rich in vitamins and fibers, and had high water content. They consisted of papaya, grapefruits, and pears. I

knocked on the door and Bumi showed up with blanket covered around her body.

“What are you doing here?” she sounded irritated.

“I was here on behalf on your brother. He asked me to watch over you.”

“Oh, fruits, can I have some?”

Since I brought food, She let me in and ushered me to the messy living room room. A wad of crumpled tissues, likely used for a recent runny nose, were scattered across the table alongside a leftover cup of instant noodles and an empty vitamin C bottle. It appeared she'd slept on the sofa.

“You shouldn't eat fast food, especially when you're sick.” I advised.

“Hot soup is good for my body to recover.” She paid no attention, munching on the watery pears.

“When did you last eat?”

“Last night, I guess.” she mumbled.

This girl would die if she lived alone, I thought with a sigh. Heading to the kitchen, I scanned the fridge to see if there were any ingredients for a decent meal. Omurice seemed like a good option based on the available ingredients. I grabbed two chicken thighs and sliced it thin. Sizzling the butter in frying pan, I stir-fried the sliced meat with onions, green peas, and leftover rice from the rice cooker. Six eggs, cracked open, their contents beaten with a fork. I poured the egg mixture on on a different pan, letting it cook halfway through. Placing the chicken rice in the center of the omelette, I wrapped both sides of the omelette around the filling. The final flourish—the sauce drizzled in a zigzag pattern across the omurice.

I returned to the living room with a steaming plate of omurice. To my surprise, she wasn't alone. An orange tabby cat



wearing a red necklace was sleeping on her lap. I placed the dish on the table and sat next to her.

"I didn't know you guys have a cat. I always thought you were a dog person"

"He was a stray cat a month ago," she explained. "He visited me almost everyday with his cute face and short fur. He was sleeping on the doormat all the time. He never steal my food and never shit on my house. I've never had a pet before, but I decided to adopt him. I named him Brutal."

"Brutal, huh? That's an interesting name for a sweet innocent looking cat."

"Don't let that face fool you. He's a warrior at heart, a barbarian. He chases off with every cat that dares enter our territory, devours food like there's no tomorrow, it was his last supper, and no rat escapes his sharp claws. Somehow he never touches and scratches our belongings. What a smart cat, making me fall in love with him every single day." She was stroking Brutal's chin.

"Oh, and about the dog thing, honestly I never like dogs. When I was in kindergarten, I had to walk pass my neighbor pit bull-breed dog every morning before school and every noon after school. The dog was my size and he would bare their teeth, stick out his tongue, and bark at me. My mother told me he just wanted to play with me, but it just made me scared. Another reason was taking care of a dog also requires extra effort. You, at least, have to walk your dog once a day so it won't be stressed out. I don't even have the energy to roam the street and now you have to do it with your dog? Give me a break! They said dogs were faithful creature, but I don't give a damn. Hachiko my ass. If I died alone in this house without no one to rescue my corpse, I don't mind being eaten by Brutal. It's natural selection, a food chain"

“What a way to describe cats and dogs.”

A whiff of chicken seemed to catch his attention. He swiveled his head, then with a determined plop, landed on my lap. A sandpapery tongue darted out, leaving a rough rasp against my skin as it snatched at the lingering scent of chicken.

“I think he likes you.”

“No, he asks me for his share.”

We devoured our omurice, the fluffy egg and savory rice disappearing in a satisfying rush. She said I was a good cook and added that I was a jack of all trade. For Brutal, I reserved a small piece of chicken. Just like Bumi warned, his eagerness to claim his prize sometimes resulted in a playful nip at my finger. Satisfied with his meal, Brutal continued his slumber on the doormat. We finished our meal, and to my surprise, she offered to help me wash the dishes. She looked better after eating the meal.

I got a phone call from Restu. He was asking about his sister's condition. I said everything was alright. Without so much small talk, he hung up. He was probably absorbed in analyzing minerals.

“Your brother told me to remind you to take your pills, eat, and drink plenty of water. Why doesn't he just tell you himself?”

“I never pick up his call.”

“Why? He's your brother after all. Not some random loan sharks trying to get his money back.”

“Ugh, It's hard to explain. I love him, alright? Just because he's my brother doesn't mean he can force stuffs on me. I'm not her little princess anymore.”

“You've got a point there. Anyway, I should cancel our appointment again. I won't be in the city this weekend. Make

sure you've recovered by the time I'm back." I packed my things and got ready to go home.

"Where are you going?"

"Visiting my grandma in Pati. I quite miss her."

"Where is it?"

"On the southern part of Central Java."

"Can I tag along?"

"You what?" my eyes widened.

"Can I tag along?" She repeated the same question with the same intonation.

"No, I travelled by bus and you won't like it."

"We can drive my car to go there."

"The answer is still the same, and this time you can't have your way even if you beg me and bawl you eyes out."

"Oh, please just this time. I promise I won't bother you with my childish behavior. I will be a good girl and sit there like a good puppy." her hands pleaded.

"That's not it. You're sick and I didn't bring sick people to meet my grandma."

"Look at me! I'm healthy and strong as a body builder." Bumi hoisted her cat, curling her cat as if he was a dumbbell. He didn't seemed to bother and continued sleeping peacefully.

"Listen, I lied to your brother once and it will be the last. End of story." I insisted.

She didn't said anything. Instead, she dropped her cat with care and proceeded to dial number. He was punching his brother phone number.

"Don't." I saw what was going on. The phone was ringing. My life was on the line. He was still not answering.

"Yes." She held the trump card.

"Okay, okay! I give up." I had no choice beside to relent and accept her terms. What a sly girl.

## Chapter 7

The blue sedan parked in the empty lot near my boarding house. I stashed my backpack into the car trunk beside Bumi's luggage and her guitar. I got into the car, pushed the key and ignited the engine. I could smell the subtle peony car perfume. Beside me, a petite girl with makeup was wearing her seat belt. She was wearing a blue floral dress, beige tassel loafers, and a pink pastel scarf coiled around her neck.

"Can we make a quick stop at the mini-mart first? I need to buy some thing" she asked, applying her lip balm on her lips.

"Sure."

I didn't felt like talking. I still didn't believe I was doing this. My thoughts were racing with the possibilities and the consequences of my actions. Endless "what if" scenarios were clouding my mind. Maybe I was overthinking it. Maybe things wouldn't be as bad as I thought. I should relax a bit. The silver lining was I could arrive faster and have someone to talk to.

We stopped by the convenience store. I waited on the car while Bumi bought her things. She came back with two big groceries bag, she pulled out yogurt drink with peach flavor, and gave it to me.

"I have to make sure my driver is in good shape." she sipped her beer. "And, oh, can I play my Spotify playlist?"

"Do as you please." I replied. She didn't have to asked since this was her own car.

The car speaker was playing "Cintailah Cinta", the sixth studio album by Dewa 19. I focused on the street while Bumi belted out the tunes, her hands mimicking Andra Ramadhan's guitar lick. She memorized all the lyrics. This reminded me of school trips. Back then, whenever we traveled, the bus would erupt in chorus of Peterpan, Dewa 19, Padi, Sheila on 7, Radja, ST 12, and other big bands that was popular at the time. We knew every lyrics without searching it on the internet.

As we drove out of the city, we passed under an archway gate inscribed with a message of safe travels. It was a sunny day. We could feel the warm sunlight streaming through the car windows. The main road transitioned into a smaller road, winding its way through the hills. Lush greenery lined the road, and the winding path offered glimpses of valleys below. The only sounds were the hum of the engine and the occasional chirp of birds. The road grew steeper as we climbed higher into the hills. Bumi nagged me with silly questions like 'where we are', 'what is that', 'are we close yet', 'look at that', 'isn't that cute', and many more.

"Why do you insist on going?" I interrupted her singing session.

"Wait for the song to finish." she replied with a grin.

"Sorry."

She sing the last part of the chorus and the song faded out with a mellow outro.

"What was it again?" she asked, her voice light. "Oh yeah, curiosity! I never had a family outing like this, just you and me hitting the road. Wouldn't it be fun? It's unlike anything I've ever done before. Maybe because..." She hesitated, biting her lip slightly. Her knuckles tightened around the steering wheel for a moment, then relaxed. "Because in our grand palace, things haven't always been exactly like a normal family," she

mumbled, her gaze fixed on the road ahead. The smile that had been playing on her lips faltered for a moment, a flicker of sadness crossing her eyes. A heavy silence settled in the car. Then, taking a deep breath, she forced a smile. "Wow! Look at that beautiful terracing down below, right?" she tried to change the subject, her voice a touch desperate.

"It was indeed beautiful." I agreed.

Bumi lost her energy after making the car a walking karaoke. Her phone, still playing The Cure, lay abandoned next to her as she snored softly. I chuckled, surprised by the gentle rasping sound coming from such a seemingly delicate creature. We had arrived in Semarang, the capital city of Central Java. With the sun high in the sky, I decided to show Bumi around a bit.

Gently shaking her shoulder, I said, "Hey, wake up! Look!"

Her eyes fluttered open, momentarily confused, then widened in delight as she took in the sight of Lawang Sewu. "Lawang Sewu! I've always wanted to see it! I've it only on the history book, and now it's in front of my eyes. Oh my God, I can't believe it." both of his palms were pressed against the window.

The majestic building loomed before them, its hundreds of doors casting long shadows in the afternoon sun. Whispers of its colonial past and local legends seemed to hang in the air. We drove around the roundabout five times, encircling Tugu Muda. Bumi's astonishment seemed not to cease. After nine times, we actually got bored and left the place. The fuel was nearly empty, so I pulled into the nearest gas station. We grabbed a bite before continuing our journey. My estimation went a little off track. We arrived at my grandma's house close to midnight, greeted by the warm glow of lights and the familiar scent of

freshly baked cookies. I gently taking the grandma's hand in both of mine. The warmth of her wrinkled felt grounding after a long day of travel. Bumi, sensing the cue, reached out and did the same, her touch light and respectful. A smile bloomed on Grandma's face, crinkling the corners of her eyes.

"Well, well," she chuckled, her voice warm. "Looks like you finally brought someone home."

Before I could launch into introductions, interjected, "Grandma, this is Bumi! Your future daughter-in-law!" a flicker of surprise crossed my face, but seeing the warmth in Grandma's eyes, I decided to play along.

Grandma's gaze shifted to Bumi, taking her in from head to toe. "Oh, my, what a beautiful young lady," she said, reaching out to pinch my shoulder playfully. "Seems like my little boy isn't so little anymore, huh?"

We went inside and chatted for a while before finally heading to sleep in our own rooms.

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That day, I slept like a log. The exhaustion from hours of driving melted away during a long, uninterrupted sleep. The sunlight was filtered by the white curtain, casting a soft glow across the rude. I checked my phone. It was nine o'clock. I left my room and no one was in the living room. I went to the kitchen, surprised to find Bumi was helping Grandma prep for our breakfast.

"Morning sunshine!" Bumi teased me, her voice dripping with fake sweetness.

I completely oblivious, I tiptoed the scattered ingredients on the floor and ambled to the dispenser, filling a glass of water.

My grandma smacked my butt. "Ouch! What was that for?" I yelped. Glancing back at Bumi, I saw a playful smirk on

her face. It suddenly dawned on me that I just ignored my 'beloved' girlfriend.

"Next time, wake up earlier and give your grandma a hand." Grandma admonished me.

I scratched my back and left the kitchen. Slumped onto the living room sofa, I grabbed the remote and numbly punched a random number in daze. Local news, nothing interesting. I decided to take a bath, and when I was done, food was served on the table. It was nasi gandul, a traditional dish from Pati. This was my comfort food. I used to eat this three times in a whole week back home. No wonder I missed it so much. The aroma of the flavorful beef soup filled the air. My mouth began to water. I came back to the kitchen to retrieve a plat and once again my grandma smack my hand.

"What is now?" I exclaimed with exasperation.

"Wash the dishes first, and you can go."

I let out a disgruntled grunt and began the tedious task of cleaning up the mess they made. By the time I finished, everyone was already settled on the table with empty clean glass plates in front of them. I led the prayer and finally we ate together. I praised my grandma's cooking and she said I was just hungry. She never accepted any compliment from me.

Grandma's story delved into my childhood. It turned out I was a shy kid with no friends, but I excelled in school. I was always ranked first and active in sports. Then she got to the interesting part, something I had done that Bumi didn't know about. She retold the story of how I earned the infamous nickname "little thief" in the bustling traditional market. The air buzzed with merchants' calls, a symphony of colorful fruits, smelly seawater fish, and the irresistible aroma of freshly baked jajanan pasar. The title wasn't given lightly. It all started when the seller caught me red-handed taking a sneaky bite out of a



fruit and leaving it back on the stall. In my innocent mind, it wasn't a crime. The merchant usually offered a taste before we bought anything. The problem was, I applied that logic to every single fruit I could reach. I was sane enough not to touch the fish and cakes. I still remember how scared I was. I thought they'd put me in jail. Instead, grandma laughed and apologized to the merchant, even buying a plastic bag full of fruits. Bumi giggled at the story and I couldn't help but laugh at myself too.

We finished our breakfast, and each of us went about our own activities. The noon hour stretched lazily into afternoon, uneventful for us three. I curled up in my room with a book, while Bumi diligently practiced her guitar skills. I could hear the occasional twang of a missed note followed by a muttered curse. Grandma was stationed in the living room, glued to the television as a soap opera played. Every now and then, she'd say "astagfirullah" and dab at her eyes with a tissue. I couldn't comprehend why Grandma never seemed to grow tired of watching the same shit for years. The plot was always predictable: a destitute husband and wife enduring mistreatment from their neighbors. Then, a stroke of luck would make them wealthy. However, as their fortune grew, so did their pride, leading them to forget their humble origins. Sadly, God was angered, resulting in their impoverishment once more, but now with a newfound devotion to faith. In the most extreme cases, tragedy struck, often claiming the life of one of them. It was contradictory how the theme song of religious TV show was turned into meme on the internet. We regrouped for dinner. While eating, Grandma suggested that I took her to the alun-alun. Bumi appeared confused, so I explained to her it was a public square where people gathered to for events. She dropped her spoon out of excitement. The night finally came. Grandma refused to join, saying she was too old for it. I was

wearing a simple black pants and a plain white T-shirt, while she was wearing the opposite: an intricate white dress complemented with black cardigan. We hailed a pedicab to downtown. The pedicab driver, with a thick accent, asked us where we were from. Bumi, once again, lied to the driver, saying that we were a newly married couple on our honeymoon. I held back my laughter. We did indeed looking like a couple with matching outfit. The driver congratulated us and wished us happiness. We arrived at alun-alun Pati. The place was surrounded by trees, mosque, regent's office, and markets. He dropped us off near the mosque, and I gave him a tip. It was crowded tonight, mostly filled with a family and youngster.

"Rakha! Rakha! Rakha!" she called out insistently, jerking the hem of my shirt her. Her other hand pointed at the tent shop that selling rabbit and horse satay.

"Oh, it's common in here." I explained, seeing her surprised expression.

"Have you ever tried it?"

"I haven't actually."

"Thank God," She sighed. "I was getting ready to mock you for a second there. Those rabbits and horses are too darn cute to eat, aren't they. How can they do such things to them? Poor souls."

"Hold up there. Then, what about cows and chickens, let alone fish and another sea creatures?"

"That's a different case. They are livestock, born and raised for consumption." She argued.

"No, actually there's a reason they're being called livestock. Borrowing from Yuval Noah Harari's book *Sapiens*, Homo sapiens were once nomadic, constantly moving from one place to another. Around ten thousand years ago, they transitioned their lifestyle to become settled, settling in one place. With

resources becoming scarce, they began cultivating crops and domesticating animals. Sheep, cows, and chickens were chosen for their docile nature and ease of handling, unlike wild horses which were difficult to capture, and rabbits which didn't produce a significant amount of meat." I countered.

"I'm speechless. Why do you always seem to know everything? Could you just pretend not to know the answer to make me feel less stupid?" She grumbled

"I can't. It would make you cocky." It made her burst into laughter.

I held her hand as we crossed the street full of cars and motorcycles. For some reason, we kept holding hands while roaming the stalls. We played a gambling-like game in which you were required to throw a hoop to a particular pole to get a specific prize. I was a basketball star starting five in high school, yet ironically I missed them all. Bumi, on the other hand, pulled off one lucky shot and managed to win the grand prize. Sailor Moon doll clutched in her arms, she sang merrily. We ordered cotton candy, and the machine whirled to life. Its spinning arm, a blur of motion, transformed a cloud of pink sugar into a giant pink-hued furball-like object. We sat on the field of grass in the center of alun-alun and nibbled our sweet snacks. Bumi was curious about the illuminated toy that the children were playing with. Instead of explaining it to her, I had just bought it and let her try it herself. I helped her adjust her hand position so that the toy would reach the highest point in the sky. She pulled the catapult, and the toy soared into the air. The twinkling toy, a kaleidoscope of red, green, and blue lights, hung suspended in mid-air, as if defying gravity by its featherweight and air friction.

"Don't you ever think how lucky it is to be a bird? You can fly anywhere and anytime you want, watching everything as if they were tiny little objects." she surmised.

“Not really. Remember about Icarus?”

“Icarus?”

“Son of Daedalus, the renowned inventor. His father created wings made of feathers and wax to escape the punishment from King Minos. They actually managed to flee from the labyrinth by flying, and then you know what?” I paused to give a little time before the turn of event. “Icarus was overexcited, ignored his father’s precaution. With the wind whipping his hair, a song of freedom, he flew higher, higher, closer to the sun. Alas, his wings melted, the once proud feathers turning into a shower of molten wax and he plummeted towards sea where he met his demise.”

“What a tragedy.” she frowned. “He’s a little ambitious, isn’t he? If I were him I would fly lower to the sea, maybe he could see a pod of dolphins!”

“Perhaps too ambitious.” I repeated. “Flying above the sea is actually a good idea, but easier said than done.”

“I didn’t understand ambitious people. Where do they get that energy to pursue their dreams? I just wanted to be like ordinary people. Graduate, get a shitty job, inherit wealth from my rich parents, pay house mortgage, marry someone that lack of imagination because I don’t wanna be alone, have ungrateful children, get divorced with your alcoholic husband, and died of loneliness. Isn’t that beautiful?” she let out a sigh, her voice trailing off “How about you? Do you have one?”

“Same with you, I guess.” I replied somewhat mechanically.

“No, no, no,” she disagreed, shaking her finger. “You seemed to know and understand everything. The one thing you don’t know at all is yourself. I wanted to know how you see things with your own feelings, not from a detached or analytical

perspective but from your heart. So, try to answer this question as honest as possible. What's your ambition?"

The question triggered something deep within me. Regardless of the hustle and bustle sound around us, I could only hear her and myself. There was an invisible barrier enveloping the two of us. Bumi always wanted to know my perspectives about anything. My own feelings? Detached? Analytical? This was how I survived the predicament up until now. I was busy struggling with what happened with inside to the point I didn't realize Bumi patted my face lightly. I snapped back to reality.

"Is everything okay?" both of her palms cupped on my cheeks.

I slowly nod, assuring her that I was okay.

"If there's anything you want to tell me, I'm all ears, alright?" She caressed my hair with gentle strokes.

"Let's go home. Grandma should be waiting for us."

It was getting late, and the moon shone with its pale white glow. People were leaving, their footsteps fading into the distance, and so did we. The wind breezed softly, a gentle caress that stirred the withered leaves, causing them to flutter down in a random dance. Bumi still had energy left in her. She took long strides like a child, spinning and dancing with her sailor moon doll. She stopped, looked back, and told me to catch up with her. I just smiled without bothering to increase my pace. Finally, we walked side by side, unlike the bustling cities we knew, here the place was already hushed. She clung to my arm, and the yellow street lamps cast long shadows on us. Three steps, and our shadows appeared, three more steps, and they were gone. We remained silent and let our thoughts wander. The simple act of being together was enough to fill our lonely hearts. The world belonged only to the two of us, much

like when Adam and Eve were first punished to roam the earth, and met again after separated for years. I had never felt like that before. The way my heart beat matched hers and the warmth she emitted from her body melted the ice that had trapped me in the deepest bottom of my heart. I loved the way she viewed the world through simple things. I loved the way she slightly tilted her head and looked at me in the eyes. I loved how she forced her way to get what she wanted. I loved how she missed those notes while singing and strumming her guitar. I loved the way she let her freckles show, choosing not to mask them with concealer. I loved how she cared about how I felt and didn't think of me as a weirdo. I had never wanted someone's presence that much. I wanted to forget about the world and only think about her. I wanted to stay like that with her forever. I wanted to preserve that moment and never forget about her. We arrived home. Grandma scolded us for coming home too late and made her waiting. It was worth it, every moment of it. She locked the door, turned off the lamp, and headed straight to her room. I sat there with Bumi on the living room with the TV turned on, showing local shows rated for adults and forbidden for minors. I put my hand on her shoulder and she let her head rest on mine. It felt like TV was watching us, not the other way around. I noticed she was already sleeping so I made sure not to wake her up. We fell asleep on the couch that night, the TV showing colorful bars because there's nothing left to broadcast.

## Chapter 8

I was in the living room with Bumi, practicing our guitar. It was raining outside and Brutal was nowhere to be seen. She mentioned that he hadn't been home for days. Her hands were healed completely without a single trace of scar. Weeks had passed since our little secret adventure to Pati, which remained unknown to her brother. I continued to teach Bumi every weekend like a normal guitar tutor, and she was my pupil, as if nothing had happened between us. We never discussed 'that' day. The topic was never brought up, and I thought it best to let it go. Whatever had happened that day stayed there. I still remember what Restu told me that day, not put my hopes too high. I also think Bumi couldn't care less about that day. It was her normal usual day and I happened to be there by chance.

I was proud of her significant progress in learning new things week after week. She was improving after every study session, able to play a few songs with simple chords. I thought she might get bored like her brother after mastering the basics, but she expressed a desire to learn fingerpicking. Most of her favorite bands were from the old days, known for their experimental and revolutionary techniques. Nowadays, popular songs on the top ten Billboard charts often use simple chord progressions, consisting of four chords repeated throughout the intro, chorus, and outro. Not all of them, but most.

I was still in the living room with Bumi when the main door creaked open. Rainwater splashed over his shirt as he

entered, mimicking the 'Andy Dufresne' hand celebration after crawling through the sewage tunnel for hours. It symbolized freedom.

"Free at last. Independence is the right of all nations!" he declared, quoting the first line of The Preamble of the 1945 Constitution of Indonesia.

"Care to explain?" her sister asked, annoyed by the sudden frantic movement.

I understood what he meant. Restu finally broke up with his girlfriend after being together since high school. He didn't show any sadness or regret. If he was happy, I would be happy for him.

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I excused myself a little earlier than usual last night. I had to study for my final exam, which was the next day, and I had to make sure I aced it. Unlike other days, when I arrived, the seats were already packed with students reviewing tests from last semester or last year's exam. If they were lucky, some questions would be similar or even exactly the same. I had only studied for two hours the day before and refused to look back. It would only confuse my memory. Reviewing the material from my notes was enough for me to solve three out of four questions. If I opened my notes again right now, it would only confuse my brain with too much information at the same time. Two exam proctors entered the room, and everybody scrambled to the front of the class to put away their bags. They returned with only a pen and a calculator clutched in their hands. Once seated, the proctors distributed the exam papers and the answer sheets. Silence descended as everyone glued to questions and started writing the answers with no time to waste. One proctor sat at the lecturer table in front of the room, and the other dragged a chair to watch from the back. I scribbled my name



and student number, a practiced routine that felt oddly out of place in the charged atmosphere. The first question was about the theory and fundamentals of the subject, which should be easy for everyone because the scritch-scratch of pens could be heard all across the room. Thirty minutes ticked by, and I expected everyone to be on the second or third question. The occasional pen clicks and low groans of despair could be heard. The questions must be out of the box. I finished the third question and refused to spend my time solving the last question or even just write the question. It wouldn't do much. B or C was what I expected. Time was up. Some students were still working on their answers when the proctors collected their answer sheets. When the proctor jerked my works, I arose and left first to avoid crowd. Hearing the birds chirp, breathing in the fresh air, and letting feeling the gentle warmth of morning sunlight kissing your skin after a challenging exam were the best things in the world. Since I skipped breakfast this morning, I decided that having lotek as a brunch near the hospital would be a good idea. I turned on the data on my phone. Three missed calls from Bumi. She left a message inviting me to see an exhibition in ARTJOG and offered to pick me up at my place. I agreed and texted her back, letting her know I would be ready at 5.

Her blue sedan showed up fifteen minutes late according to the schedule. It must be jammed. I thought she was alone. Her brother was with her, driving the car. I joined them on the backseat. Bumi greeted with me with his usual joy, while Restu wasn't even bother to look back. I noticed something was not right. I could see from the rear mirror he was expressionless. Something must be stuck in his mind. It was the same vibe he had when he came to me back then.

We were heading over to Jogja National Museum. The place was only six kilometers away from our departure point,

but it took almost 1 hour and a half to arrive there. The parking lot was full so we have to wait for another car to leave. We finally found our spot and got out the car. Restu and Bumi were wearing the same dress code: oversized jackets and loose jeans. Restu said it was on him and paid the entry fee. We were given paper bracelets as identification for visitors. The place wall full of arts, including sculptures, paintings, or installations. Bumi took her time examining each piece of art, reading the artists' descriptions about their creations and observing the textures and details. I could hear her thinking out loud. Restu and I just stood there, not paying much attention about the arts. I do love arts. Essentially, painting a picture was the same as writing a book. Several words might seem to have the same meaning, but in fact they were slightly different. Choosing the right words for the right context would produce a beautiful prose. Choosing the right colors for the right gradation would produce a beautiful portrait. Occasionally, she would ask us about our opinions. I tried to validate her thoughts with mine while Restu only simply responded with 'it's good'. We stumbled upon a large painting depicting a chessboard populated by Lilliputians dressed as white and black pawns trying to bring down each other. It caught my attention the most. The artist's portrayal of war through chess was sublime. In my opinion, the little pawns were supposed to represent us, ordinary people. We were involved in such conflict and discord in the name of something we believed. We shed our tears and bloods without realizing we were controlled by greater power above us.

We reached the end of the hallway on the third floor. With nothing left to see, we exited the building. Near the building, there was a podium for special guests to perform. It was Jason Ranti who was on the stage. He was singing 'Variasi Pink'. The red stage lighting illuminated his flamboyant outfit.

The blaze of cigarettes and the swirling smoke were prominent in the dim light. Visitors were crowded around the stage, forming a half circle. It caught Bumi's attention, and she fled, so we were forced to follow her. She joined the rest the audience to sing along with the singer. Suddenly, Restu tapped lightly on my shoulder, wanting to talk. I followed him to a corner, keeping a distance from the loud crowd. I knew where was this going.

"I wanted to ask you something if you don't mind," he puffed his cigarettes to ease his nerves.

"Go ahead."

"Do you remember when I wasn't home several weeks ago?"

"When you were on your field trip?"

"Yeah," he was smoking like a chimney. "I asked for your help to look after Bumi, remember?"

"Our security guard from the house resident told me that she was out for days driving her car."

"Wait, so you stalked her."

"For safety measures," he said, looking offended. "Besides, that's not the main point. Do you know where she went?"

"Why don't you ask her yourself? Wouldn't it be easier?" I tried to avoid the question.

"You were the last person to visit her before she wandered off somewhere. I don't know, man, no hard feelings, but my intuition tells me you're hiding something from me."

"Listen," I took a long breath. "Whatever she's doing or wherever she goes is not your business."

"What do you mean it's not my business, she's my sister," his face was reddened. "Tell me the truth. What's going on with you with my sister?" he knew all along. He pretended to be clueless about the situation.

“You know what is going on between us.”

“Have you lost your mind? Are you insane? Dude, he's already engaged to someone else, and this is what you do? I never thought it would be my own friend—my dear friend who claims not to know a single thing about love. This is your nature all along, huh? I was wrong about you. This what happens to someone who isn't raised properly by their parents.” he sneered. “I'm warning you. From now on, stay away from my sister, or you know what will happen to you,”

There was some surge of emotions stirring inside me. I had never been this angry before. Was it because of Bumi?

“Who do you think you are?” anger boiled within me. “Being a brother to someone doesn't give you the right to always have things your way. Why do you and your family treat her like a commodity? She isn't a stock where you expect gains and losses, you dumbass. She's a human being with real emotions and feelings. Why do you get to choose your path while her future is dictated by your parents? It's unfair and childish. And don't you dare mention my parents again, do you hear me?”

“And what if I did? Your dead mother won't come back from the dead if I did.” he taunted. ‘Come on, champ, what are you going to do about it?’

That was it. I completely lost control. I punched him hard until he fell on the ground. He remained there, clutching his heart. His breathe became erratic. My adrenaline rush began to subside, fear took its place. His heart condition must have relapsed. I noticed everyone was staring at us. I immediately sought help and called the ambulance. This wasn't how it was supposed to go. This wasn't what I expected. And now, with every passing moment, the consequences drew nearer and more terrifying than ever before.

## Chapter 9

The guy was holding one of the guitars and comparing it the one on display. He had been in the shop for fifteen minutes, examining the guitars and mumbling to himself occasionally.

“What makes them different? It looks the same to me.”

“The difference was the build quality, and it’s more expensive because of the label. I suggest you to buy this for beginners. Nylon won’t hurt your fingers.”

“Okay, I’ll take the cheaper one.”

The guy was looking at other instruments while I wrapped the guitar on its case. I put the cash on the register with a clink and handed out the change as the cash register dinged.

“Thank you for coming. Have a good day.”

The guy left with his brand new guitar, whistling a merrily tune. There were no costumers coming in after. I sat on the stool behind the glass counter stuffed with strings, picks, and other items, waiting for my shift to end. The clock showed fifteen past nine, leaving forty-five more minutes until my part-time job as a shopkeeper was done.

Being a shopkeeper was an easy job. Nothing much to do actually in this 6x8 room. I only had to watch the shop, write down every transaction, and ensure the shop was neat and tidy on weekend from afternoon close to midnight. The pay was good and enough to make the ends meet. I had stopped smoking entirely and I rarely drink, so I could save the money

for my college fund. I spent the rest of time playing a song, most of them are The Beatles, until I lost track of time. It was already fifteen minutes past the closing hour. I put down the guitar and was getting ready to close the shop. After making sure everything was in its place and the electricity was cut off, I closed the shutter and locked it down with a padlock. I brought my own spare key, so I didn't have to return the key to the shop owner. The shop was located near the ring road and it took me thirty minutes worth of walk to get home. The street was still bustling with people, either hanging out in coffee shops or angkringan. I walked mindlessly through the town, because my thoughts wandered back to three months ago.

I was sitting in the cramped backseat with two paramedics. Restu was lying on the stretcher, unconscious, with an ventilator attached to his mouth. The siren was loud enough to make another driver gave us a way to the hospital. One of the paramedic asked me questions about Restu's background and what happened. I told him everything I knew, including the fact I had been on bad terms with him. The paramedic checked several boxes on the clipboard, which was full of paper, and stored it in his bag. The ambulance parked in front of the emergency room. The paramedics pulled out Restu and carried him inside. I followed them, but a nurse stopped me at the front door, explaining that only doctors and authorized medical staff were permitted to enter. I tried to be calm and collected, following her instruction and got back to the waiting room. Bumi appeared after taking care of few documents and sat beside me. She couldn't stop bawling her eyes out. She kept asking me what would happen or what if he didn't make it. I hugged her and said nothing. I wouldn't say something like 'he's going to be okay' or other bullshit fake pretentious words of comfort. Fate were not in my hands and I couldn't predict

the future. Silent was enough to make the situation felt less chaotic.

Seven hours and it was almost morning. The double door opened with a soft thud. A doctor emerged, clad in his surgical attire, and approached us. He explained that Restu was already in a stable condition. While I didn't remember every medical term he used, I understood that the operation was a success. It was a case of a cardiac arrest. He also told us to take a rest and came back later when Restu had regained his consciousness. We thanked her and stood on the door. Restu was sleeping peacefully with numerous high-end medical things attached to his body. We decided to stay and occasionally fell asleep sitting on the waiting room. Both of their parents arrived at night. The mother hugged their daughter and her husband just stood there with her military appearance. It took three days until Restu was allowed to leave the hospital. Since then, I hadn't had a chance to pay him a visit or talk with him about the matter. I was afraid to trigger his heart again. Bumi already knew about what had happened that night and reported me about his condition every single day. We often met on a cafe to discuss about it. Even though he had been released, he was still undergoing treatment at his home in Jogja. The doctor would visit the house to check on Restu's health improvement and their parents even sent one of their trustworthy maid to take care of the house. They said that Restu wasn't able to perform heavy duty or things that would make his heartbeat increasing, so the family took a leave of his absence from college for a whole semester to focus on his health.

The entire situation was tough for his family, and for me too. I found myself in a position where I was to blame. I deceived him by dating her engaged sister without his knowledge, and continued to do so after the incident. Sigmund

Freud was right about the struggles between my superego and id. I couldn't seem to stop myself. I knew it was wrong, but the clash between my sacred morals and insatiable desires really messed with my ego. Letting go of this guilty pleasure wasn't easy. I rationalized my actions, convincing myself I wasn't causing harm, that it was a complicated situation beyond my control. I downplayed the consequences and justified myself to ease my guilt. But deep down, I knew I was betraying his trust and causing pain. Despite my justifications, the weight of my actions weighed heavily on my conscience, leaving me torn and full of regret. I loved her sister and hated myself for it.

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I was inside the blue sedan at McDonald's parking lot with Bumi. We had ordered two meal packages consisting of two cheeseburgers, two medium-sized french fries, and two 32 ounces of Coca Cola at 'drive thru'. We rarely went here but today time wasn't on our side and we needed someplace quiet to talk.

"How is he?" I asked the conversation after washing my mouth with the coke.

"I gness hisogay." Bumi was still munching her burger.

"Gay?" I actually heard her and wanted to make fun on her.

She took her time swallowing her food. "He's okay. Nothing to worry about. His health is improving."

"Do you think I could visit him right now?"

"Of course. He often talks about you. He should be missing you. You're his closest friend, right? How long have you guys been parted?"

"Close to a month."

"Oh, come on! You guys were like left testicle and right testicle. Neither of you can't be separated."



I almost choked on the food I was eating. "That's actually gross, but it perfectly describes the situation."

"What would you rather lose? Your left or your right?"

"What do you mean?"

"We're still talking about testicles, aren't we?"

"Yes, yes." I cleared my throat. This time, I refused to eat for a while. "Isn't it basically the same thing? That wouldn't make any difference at all."

"No, it's not! Let me give you an example. Because I'm biologically a woman, I would rather lose my right boob."

"Because?"

"Oh, it's easy. Based on its appearance, my left boob is much smaller and it has a skewed nipple."

"Wait a minute, it doesn't make sense. Why do you choose to keep the left one instead of the right? Wouldn't it makes more sense if you get rid the ugly one?"

"If I chose the right one, it would make me greedy. I'd pray every single night for my left one to grow and become like the right, or even ask my parents for a breast implant. In the worst scenario, I'd blame god for my physical disability, convert to another religion or even become an atheist. I'd put all my trust in modern technology and remove all my boobs and get a new pair of big, busty ones. But I still wouldn't be satisfied, so I'd have more plastic surgery. I'd fill my lips and jaws with filler and get a pointed nose with a rhinoplasty. With all the money I wasted, I'd still feel ugly and hate myself." She took another bite of her burger before continuing. "But if I chose the left one, instead of being ungrateful, I'd thank God for giving me just one ugly boob instead of two. People would stop staring at my breasts and focus on my overall appearance. I'd surely be more grateful for my own flaws."

“Good answer.” Sometimes I couldn’t understand her way of thinking. “If that’s the case, my answer would be left.”

“Why?” She seemed dead serious, waiting for my answer.

“Maybe the left area tends to itch more than the right one.” I tried to give a decent answer.

She just laughed it off and kissed me on the cheek. That was the first she had done something so bold. I was blushed, though it was hidden beneath my tanned skin.

When the silence fell, I thought about what I had been pondering lately. It was about our relationship. I gathered my courage to talk about the matter. I took a deep breath, as though preparing to deliver an important speech on the podium. The atmosphere was tense, and the tension was palpable.

“By the way, I wanna talk about something.”

“Go on. What’s on your mind?” Bumi replied, washing her hands with eucalyptus-scented hand sanitizer.

“It’s about..” I struggled to find the right word. “The things that have been bothering me since that day, you know, about our relationship. We should discuss about this.”

I paused, unsure of what to say next. Was I even making a valid point? My desire was simply to understand her feelings and consider her perspective. I often deferred to others when it came to decisions involving them: I didn’t feel like I had much choice on my own, like an observer who doesn’t involve himself in the game of love.

“Listen, I..” It took me a moment to find the right words.

Before I continued, she held my hand.

“Don’t dwell on it for now. Restu’s well-being is the most important thing,” she reassured me.

She was right. I had to set aside the matter. Our first priority was to focus on her brother’s recovery. We didn’t have anything to say either, so we left the area. I told Bumi to stop at

the nearby supermarket to buy him fruits. They were the same fruits I bought Bumi when she was sick.

“We already have a lot in our fridge you know?”

“My grandma taught me to do this every time you paid a visit to someone, so it couldn’t be helped.”

We arrived. I met with their maid, Bi Mini, who welcomed us warmly. She truly lived up to her name, with her dwarfish features peeking out from beneath her batik-patterned house dress. She was far shorter than Bumi.

I went upstairs and entered Restu’s room, accompanied by Bumi and Bi Mini on either side. He was lying on his bed, wrapped on his quilt. Bead of sweats were trickling from his forehead. Maybe it was because his heart condition or it was just the weather. His face was pale and lack of depth. He heard my presence and tilted his head slightly, offering a subtle smile.

“Hey, buddy, it’s good to know you’re back.” I sat on the chair next to the bed.

“Man, you should see my chest right now. I became an Ultraman,” his voice was faint.

Bi Mini told me that Restu was forbidden from talking too much or becoming overwhelmed with intense emotions. Bi Mini left the room to continue cleaning the house while Bumi excused herself to attend a class. Understanding the situation, I took on the role of the one who talked. I discussed my grades, which were mostly assessed as Bs and Cs last semester. I also brought up my new part-time job as a shop keeper. I explained to him my tasks and how much I earned for a month. I didn’t tell him about his favorite team, Liverpool, failing to attain Champions League after crushed by their opponents, Real Madrid, three to one. Loris Karius had been playing good all season and then flopped in the final. He keep nodding, signaling he was still listening to me. In the middle of story, he

closed his eyes and I took the pretense as to end the conversation. I silently close the door and went to the living room. There was Bi Mini watching the TV.

“Is he asleep?” She was younger than my grandma, but her calm voice resembled adulthood and a mature woman.

“Like a baby.”

Bi Mini offered me some snacks and was willing to cook something for me. I refused because my stomach was still stuffed. He ignored my statement and served me a beef stew. I had no choice but to eat it. Somehow, the spices brought back my appetite, and I gobbled it up without a trace.

“This is Restu’s favorite. I’m glad you like it too.”

He served me pineapple tarts and a cup of tea as dessert. Bi Mini talked a lot about Restu and Bumi, just like my grandma talking about her grandchild. I listened with enthusiasm, waiting for secrets to be revealed about them. Bumi was making fun of me about my childhood and I was thinking of doing the same thing to her. We talked for hours, until I accidentally turned the conversation turned to Bi Mini’s personal life when I asked her about how she started working for the Omar family.

“I had been working with their family for years, even before Restu was born. I dare to say that I owe my life to them.” Her head was tilted upward, while her eyes were looking downward, as if she were trying to recollect old memories. “I was born and raised by a poor family, and even got married, in a ‘low-end’ area within a red-light district. Living in a district like that was a hellish experience. You don’t know what it’s like to live in such an area. When I was a child, just playing in the village streets, anything bad could happen to you. Almost every day, you experienced awful things: being harassed by clients despite your young age, being beaten up by thugs, being taken

by child kidnappers, and the walls of our house vibrating because the neighbors were playing loud music to attract visitors. My father was a heavy drinker and forced my own mother to sell her body to strangers. She cried almost every night because her body felt tainted by different men she barely knew at all. I found it difficult to concentrate at school because I was unable to sleep at night. My mother couldn't hold on anymore, so she left us both. My father's addiction to alcohol worsened. He sold our possessions until almost nothing left but the building. We slept at night on the used card boxes and sacks as quilts." She paused and sipped the remaining tea. I could see her hands slightly trembling.

I finally live alone when several cops barged into my house and arrested my dad. Ever since that day I never met him again. I quit school and worked as a laborer in a shrimp industry. I had to lie about my age because the company wanted to avoid hiring underage individuals. I met someone several years older than me, and we started dating. He was gentle and polite at first, but it didn't take long before he revealed his true nature six months later. He cheated on me many times, left marks on my body, and forced me to have sex. This sexual intercourse had become a lasting trauma for me. It wasn't love at all. All I felt when I was doing it was nothing but fear and pain. I could see his face indulge in a joy while my body had to resist this physical and emotional pain. The way he forced himself on me reminded me of my mother's suffering. We did it multiple times without protection, even when I was menstruating. And eventually I conceived his child and was forced to stop working. His parents forced us to be married at such a young age. He never came home to take care of his responsibilities. Instead, he mucked around, acting like a teenager. He bet our savings in cockfighting. The result was

predictable: we lost all our money.” She coughed after saying a lot.

“Oh, sorry, dear. I was talking too much to someone I just barely met. It must be a burden for you to hear such a boring story.”

“No, it’s okay. Really. Keep going on.”

“You’re such a charming man. No wonder. Bumi was into you.” This time I just responded with a smile.

“One day he came back home with a foul mood. He asked me to make him a cup of coffee. I refused his request politely. First of all, there was no coffee powder left on the kitchen. Second thing was, my pregnancy had reached almost 8 months so I should rest more and restrain from physical activity. He stood from the chair and started to smash things within his reach. I didn’t know what happened next. I lost consciousness. When I was awake, I was laying at the nearest clinic. I could see immense pain on my lower body. My stomach was flat and the nurse looked at me with pity in her eyes. At that moment I knew, I lost my baby. Not only sweet little angel, but the doctor also said that I couldn’t conceive another baby because my uterus was damaged. Even if I miraculously got pregnant, the baby would be crippled and my own life was at risk. Soon after that, he divorced me and leave me alone. With all the strength I’d got left in me, I began working again as a laborer. That was when I met their mother. I was on my way home when I found a wallet on the street. I tracked the owner’s address and returned it with the money and its contents still intact. Instead of offering me a reward or compensation, she offered me a job as her private maid. Without thinking further, I accepted the offer and have been working for them up until this day. I had been given a second chance and I wouldn’t waste it. They paid me well so I could save it for the old days. I decided not to get

involved with any men since they were only brought misfortune and lived on my own until I met my demise. Restu and Bumi were like my own children. I hope one day they will find their own happiness, just like you will too."

"You are a strong woman," I said, covering my mouth with my right hand. "I doubt I could be as strong as you if I were in your condition. I don't know what would keep me going if something like that happened. I'm uncertain about why I'm here, my purpose in life, or even my source of happiness. The only reason I keep moving forward is because I want to find a reason to live. I'm not sure if I'm on the stairway to heaven or the highway to hell. Right now, the only thing I know for sure is that I can't be happy if I'm not near her." I sighed.

"I know she's engaged to someone else," she pursed her lips. "But listen dear, don't lose faith in your love. Keep in mind that there's nothing stronger than the power of love. Love will always find its way. Love will prevail." She smiled as the story ended alongside Bumi's homecoming.

The three of us reminded me of the time when Bumi and I visited Grandma. Bumi sat beside me and leaned her head on my shoulder. I felt a bit embarrassed because someone else was watching. I wasn't used to public displays of affection, but Bumi didn't seem to mind at all. She started talking about how boring her afternoon class was. The professor has a bald patch on his head who and should have retired by now. Even when speaking into a microphone, his voice was barely audible. Half of the class was sleeping in their chairs, and she decided to slip out before the class ended, leaving after signing the attendance sheet. The night fell quickly, and Bumi finally drove me home. She told me to take good care of myself, and I reminded her to call me when she reached home safely. Once in my room, thoughts of Restu's condition returned and occupied my mind.

## Chapter 10

I was doing my routine chores as usual. The sun shone brightly and chill morning breeze blew softly, making me feel energized for the day ahead. I swept the floor under my bed and desk before mopping it, dried my pillows in the sun, changed their sheets, and tossed all the garbage into a supermarket plastic bag I had saved from shopping. While I nearly finished doing my job, someone appeared in front of my room. It was my hikikomori neighbor. He just stood there, looking at the shiny floor. It was not the floor he was gazing at: he just needed something to look for so he could avoid eye contact with me.

“Is there anything I could help with?”

“Ohayou. Hajimemashite. My name is Naufal. Yoroshiku onegaishimasu.” He bowed deeply, about 90 degree, as if I were Emperor Hirohito.

God blessed my nose, because he reeked like he hadn’t bathed in a week. His shirt was already damp with sweats even though it was still in the morning.

“You can call me Rakha.”

“Should I call you Rakha-chan? Oh, wait. Rakha-kun? Rakha-san?”

“Can you stop with the Japanese crap? Just, what do you want?” I didn’t know why I was being unfriendly.

“Actually, I want you to come to our little party?”

“Little party? What kind of party?”



“Me and my otaku friends have planned a campfire near the beach next week and I wanted you to be in there.” he made that kungfu salute.

“I’m sorry I have to decline your kind offer. I’ve got plenty works to do. Maybe next time” I said firmly.

I continued my work while he still standing there. Try as I might, I couldn’t ignore his presence at the door, and it was affecting my focus somehow.

“Man, listen. No offense, but can you leave? I need to focus on my work here.”

Unexpectedly, he bowed down. I took a step backward in surprise.

“Onegai! This is our farewell party before everyone returns to their hometown. I want to make everything perfect and memorable. One of our plans was to sing along together and I need you to be there to play the guitar. None of us could play the instrument and it wouldn’t be the same if we played the music from our phone. I’m willing to pay if necessary.”

I could see his butt crack from up here. Damn. Seeing people beg for my help was my weaknesses. I thought of another way to refuse him when suddenly something crossed my mind.

“Beach, you say?”

“Yes.”

“Okay. I’ll be there.”

“Hontou ni!?” He stood up instantly, hope lighting up his porky face.

“I’ll do it with one condition. You don’t have to pay. Instead, you have to let my bring someone with me.”

“It’s totally okay! We will make sure everything was provided for you and your friend. Gomen!”

This time I stopped him from bowing again. He pulled out a piece of paper from his pocket. It was a list of songs, written in katakana, with translations at the bottom, that would be played at the party.

“What is this? I didn’t recognize a single song on the list. Could I just play a familiar song so I didn’t have to learn something new?”

“Nani!? How come you not familiar with these songs. It was the opening song of..”

I stopped him before he lost it. “Okay, okay, I get it. Not everyone listens to your idol. And can you stop shouting every time?” I sighed.

“Hai, hai. Wakarimashita. See you next week.”

He left the room humming a cheerful tune. At last, I was left alone to finish my job. As soon as my tasks were done, I called Bumi. She sounded enthusiast after hearing the word “beach” and agreed with my proposal. I also told her to practice a few songs so we could play together as a duo.

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The day had come. I was behind the wheel, Bumi was seated next to me, and there was an unexpected guess, Naufal. He said he couldn’t tag along with his friends on motorcycles because of his weight. I wore a plain white shirt and a short chino pants. Bumi wore her usual floral dress, and Naufal? With his red aloha t-shirt and a straw hat, I knew what he was trying to do with the outfit. He was cosplaying Luffy, the main character of One Piece. People considered One Piece as the modern-day epic. It consisted of multiple arcs. The Iliad started with Gol D. Roger revealing the truth about the vast treasure hidden throughout the seas, and The Odyssey seemed nowhere

near. I guessed we had to wait another twenty years before the story ended. I watched it as a child and lost track of the episodes when they stopped airing it on TV. The last thing I remember was someone named Enel riding his ship to the moon. I thought it would be awkward with Naufal in the back, but actually it was the quite opposite. I never imagined a girl like Bumi would watch anime. A lot. Both of them was talking along the way, leaving me out. They even debated about anime on the newest generation. He stated that the recent animes were good. The main reason was because the studio could depict the fight clearly, and there was no fillers at all. While she countered the argument by saying they lacked of originality and solely focus on the strength. The plot would always be the same, copied from the older generation. The main character was weak and suddenly received godly power ups out of nowhere. The bond between the characters were weak and didn't leave lasting impressions. Both of them failed to reach the conclusion and asked for my arguments to settle their disagreement. Too bad I haven't watched any anime in the recent year, so they ended up in a draw.

We were heading south and ascending the hill. We crossed the border of Jogjakarta and entered Gunungkidul regency. There was not much to see since the area was dense with thick tall trees. Although the roads were in good condition, they were winding and steep, so I had to drive slowly and watch the road signs carefully. After navigating such perilous paths, we made it to the flat terrain and the villages. We often passed local villagers carrying their crops on their heads.

"We're near the sea." I broke the silence.

"How do you know?" Bumi asked.

"Can you smell it?"

She took a sniff and shook her head. "Smell what?"

“The salt. The air was filled with salt particles.”

“You just made it up.”

I was telling the truth. Believe it or not, I'd had sharp nose since I was baby. My mom told me that I would cry out loud if there was something smelled obnoxious, and I wouldn't stop until the odor source was gone.

Five minutes later, we finally reached the destination. We got out of the car, carried our belongings, and regroup with Bagas' friends who arrive a little earlier. That made five of us: three men and two women. The other man was called Fadhil, and the woman was Ratu. They greeted us with hospitality. It took another ten minutes to walk to the beach on foot, passing towering coconut trees. We could already hear the sound of the waves crashing onto the beachfront. One more step, and we could finally see the southern part of Jogjakarta. The light blue of the sky and the deep blue of the ocean formed a stark contrast across the horizon, filling the distance. The sunlight glistened on the sand, which appeared like tiny crystals scattered around. The wind gently blew, slapping our hairs. I tried to talk to Bumi when she already ran into the sea. Her billowed dress was wet as she danced across the shore. She screamed my name and gestured for me to join her at the water's edge. I had seen the same expression when we were in Semarang. She was genuinely amazed and happy. I wish I could preserve this moment forever. She was like an angel. I approached her, and she playfully showered me with splashes of water. This scene reminded me the opening of Steven Spielberg's movie, *Jaws*. It started with the girl fleeing from the man and encouraging him to swim with her, but the man was drunk enough to enter the water. When he woke up, the girl was gone—eaten by the shark. I need not to worry. Actually, the annual death rate due to shark attacks was lower than many

other risks, such as being killed by a human. Humans are actually more dangerous creatures than sharks.

Satisfied with the scenery, the men immediately set up the tents before the sun set, while the women were busy cooking fried rice for dinner. By nightfall, we already gathered around the bonfire. There were no other visitors than us. We were far away from the city, and with no pollution, we could see the sky clearly. It was filled with twinkling stars and a full moon. The wind changed its direction from the land towards the sea due to the temperature difference, making it easier for fisherman to sail at night. We finished every morsel on our plates and clinked our glasses in a toast. We moved to the point where we would be singing along. I sat next to Bumi. Each of us holding a guitar. We had been practicing together last week for today's performance. Surprisingly, she knew almost every song on the list, which made the learning process faster. As we rehearsed the songs one in sequence, I actually grew fond of one of the songs. It was called 'Sekai ga Owaru Made wa'. She told me it was a soundtrack from an old basketball anime and suggested me to watch the anime. Well, I believed in her taste, so I would give it a shot after this. I played the melody and Bumi played the rhythm. We were actually a dynamic duo. Everyone was clapping after each song ended, and we reached the end of the event. The night was becoming quiet, with the occasional wave crashes and the crackling fire that had almost entirely reduced to ashes. It was just the five of us, half-drunk from the fermented beverages we consumed earlier. I could see the silhouettes of their faces, flickering in the light of bonfire. Naufal said they would do a sharing session and told us we could leave if we were already sleepy, but we decided to stay. Fadhil volunteered to go first. He sat across me. This time I could see his features clearly. He was a thin man with yellowish skin,

likely indicating a high consumption of orange fruits. He had prominent cheekbones, which gave his face a distinct, square look. He scratched his right shoulder to ease his nerves.

“Remember when we were accidentally cosplaying the same character at Anime Expo? Who’s going to forget that moment? The three of us were dressed as Kurapika.” Naufal laughed heartily. Ratu simply smiled.

“There was a backstory to all of that. The truth is, I ran away from home that day. My parents wouldn’t let me go. They told me I should stop wasting my time and focus on becoming a doctor or an engineer. Typical Asian parents. I still don’t understand to this day why my parents treated me that way. I know the fact that I was their only child and one day I would bear the name of the family. I mean, my rank wasn’t bad either. I always got to top three, even came second. But I never had the chance to taste how it feels like to be at the top. No matter how hard I studied, no matter how grinded to be number one, I would never reach that level of prestige,” he paused and shook the sand of his feet “Which only led my parents to frustration. The next semester, they would force me to study at a private tutor outside of school five times a day. It was so exhausting and time-consuming. I didn’t have the time to play with my friends, even on my own. I still studied even I was sick. And finally, I reached it. I was ranked number one. My parents and I were on the way home after picking up my student report card. I expected they would congratulate me with ‘Good Job’ or ‘We proud of you’, but instead they thought me that I was just lucky because the gap between me and the second-ranked student was close. They told me to study harder so I could uphold my title. It broke my heart. After all sweat and blood I trickled, this was the outcome I received in return. Oh my god, how horrible they were. All I needed was a little love and

affection. I gradually lost interest in school and eventually my grades started to fall. I didn't do my homework and skipped the private lessons. My parents found out about this and they punished me with home grounding. I couldn't touch my PlayStation or my comic book. Of course, that didn't make me go back to being the old self who only cared about grades and pleasing them. I'm not the failure: they're the ones who failed me. When the expo day came, I sneaked out and met the two of you. That was the most beautiful thing that has happened to me. I love you guys."

"Ganbatte, Fadhil-san!" Naufal exclaimed.

The story continued with Ratu's story. I couldn't identify her much because she wore a black hoodie. All I could notice was her braces.

"Mine was the same as Fadhil. I didn't particularly hate my parents, but I'm not too close with them. Since I was a little kid, they always compared me with my big sis. My big sis was my parent's favorite. We lived in the same world, grew up in the same surroundings, but it seems we've developed into two different people. Sisters don't have to be same, I get it. But we didn't have the trace of being related at all, physically or emotionally. She's pretty. She's tall. She's smart. She's easygoing. She's popular. She knows how to treat people. And to top it all, she was a model for Gadis magazine in his teenager years. She's everything that everyone wanted to be. While on the other side, there's me. I'm not as pretty, I'm not as all, I'm average in class, I'm super shy, I'm unknown to society, and I couldn't read people's minds. I didn't envy my big sis. I love her. I truly love her. She's so kind toward me. She considered me as her little sister, without seeing my defects. The reason why life is hard is because my parents set all the high standards that were accomplished by my big sis on me. They never told me

explicitly about the favoritism, but it was glaringly obvious. The way they talk about me and my big sis in front of other people. They would say something like, ‘Oh, Ratih has won the juries’ heart. She would be on the magazine for the upcoming edition. Her grades were also astonishing. She would be accepted in the favorite public college at this point. Ratu? Oh, yes my little brat. She’s okay. She’s not like her older sister. Maybe we spoiled her too much when she was a kid.’ After that, they would just laugh it off. I thought when my big sis went to the college everything would get slightly better. I was wrong. With every achievement and reward that my big sis received, the more my parents seemed to forget about me. I’ll always be in the shadow of my sister. That wasn’t even the worst thing that have happened to my life. Missing my big sister was the most agonizing pain. Her life was tragically cut short during childbirth, and the precious baby only survived for a week. No one expected someone as perfect as her to leave this world. Since then, things have gotten worse. At home, no one talks to each other. We just go about our lives separately. Invisible walls seemed to have formed between us. I’ve been treated as if I weren’t there, and I’ve done the same to them. It takes years until I made peace with myself. HxH helped me the most. As long as I can still watch my favorite anime and read my favorite manga, I’ll be okay.”

The story ended, and tears followed the painful memory. Ratu hid her face between those hands. Both Naufal and Fadhil gave her a gentle pat on the shoulders to cheer her up. I kept tossing a few wooden sticks onto the fire to ensure it wouldn’t go out. If it followed the clockwise rotation, it should be Naufal’s turn.

“Ano.. I don’t know where to start exactly. My parents got divorced before I was born, and my mother left me with my grandmother.”



I was a bit shocked. I never expected Naufal's childhood was almost similar to mine.

"I never had any friend since elementary school. They avoided me because I was fat and slow. They called me 'porky', 'hog', 'fat-ass' and other hurtful things related to my obesity. I couldn't deal with the all the bullies and insults they hurled at me. The teacher also didn't do much to help my problem, so I quit school at such a young age. Instead, my grandma gave me basic education on how to read and write. Math comes naturally so I didn't have to worry about managing my finances. Grandma passed away when I wasn't even had my first puberty. No one came to look after me. Not even my father nor my mother. I was alone with the pension money my grandmother left me. When I was hungry, I would eat at the diner nearby. When I was bored, I would go to the internet cafe nearby. When I ran out of supplies, I would go to the supermarket nearby. When I felt lonely, I would jerk off to stimulate my brain. Life revolved around these simple routines for years. I didn't have any experience to deal with the real life or interacting with other people. I spent most of the time on the internet, chronically online and detached from reality. Then, one day, I realized my bank account dwindling. I had no choice but to work. I applied to several vacancies and none of them even bothered to contact me. A month had passed and my bank account was literally screaming zero. In order to survive, I only relied on instant noodles to survive day after day. Finally, someone called my number. They offered me a job with wages below average. The odds were not in my hands, so I accepted the job as a janitor at a brand-new fast food restaurant. Being the last person to leave the place gave me the opportunity to scrape the leftovers. I also had the time to learn how to prep and cook the food. The fried chicken was actually the real deal.

It had the potential to be the competitor KFC or A&W. Unfortunately, the owner didn't know how to do business. The prices were too expensive for someone who just re-branded his product and there was no marketing at all. The restaurant closed soon after its grand opening. Still, I had enough money left to survive another week. Without thinking twice, I pawned my grandma's jewelry and rent myself a new kiosk. I opened my own fried chicken with the recipe I stole. I was right. People in the neighborhood liked it. Soon, the business was thriving. I got the money to pay off my loan and planned to open a new branch. Some investors were interested in buying a franchise. Internet forums were the place I learned about how the mechanism of joint ventures. The offer was too tempting. I was blinded by greed, so without reading the terms and conditions properly, I signed the contract. As soon as I let them know the secret ingredients, they immediately left and started over with their own company. I couldn't sue them back because it wasn't my recipe in the first place. I also didn't have the time and money to bring the case to the court. I had to let go of my first business ever. With my previous work experience, I tried to apply for a job once again. This time I worked as an internet cafe operator. It was a paradise. I could play games, learn Japanese online or watch YouTube contents whenever I wanted. I even met my girlfriend through the V-tuber I followed. I've never seen his real face, but that's not a problem since his anime face is kawaii. We maintained our relationship in secrecy. She said it would be hard to gain new followers if her audience knew she already had a boyfriend. There's always a first time for everything. In this case, it was being involved in a toxic relationship. She was possessive. She told me to call her every night and text her whenever I could. She also stalked my social media and monitored all my accounts. I didn't mind at all. I gave

everything I had. I sent her my savings for her peripheral upgrades and helped her grind her RPG character, defeating the final boss in the deepest level in the dungeon. This time, I was blinded by love. I was too naive. I should realize this was too good to be true. She never loved me. She just pretended only to take advantage of me. There were many other creeps who fell victim to her. The one and only place that I felt comfortable betrayed me and left as if nothing had happened. I had no one to talk to and let out my feelings. Life was too hard to swallow. I couldn't take it anymore. I often stared at the ceiling. Hanging myself would not be going smoothly. I thought of other ways, like drowning myself, falling from a high place, throwing myself onto a train doing hara-kiri, or even poisoning myself with insect spray. I keep contemplating these dark thoughts, considering which method was the fastest and least painful. I decided to extend my breath a little longer and watch an anime as a final act before I ended my miserable life. It turned out that the anime saved my life. There was nothing special or morale-boosting about it. It was the simplicity that hooked me. The way the main character lives their life to the fullest extent without questioning much. When you look up close your life, it's a tragedy. Step further back, and you realize it's just a comedy. The history keeps repeating itself. You're nothing but dust in the wind." Naufal cried while smiling. His breath was heavy, and there was snot coming out. Everyone else hugged him tight except for me and Bumi. What a sorrowful night, I thought to myself. I was wrong about him. I felt guilty of thinking that his life was easy. There was so much to learn about life. When Naufal's cries began to subside, it was Bumi's turn to tell the story. I wasn't sure whether Bumi wanted to talk about her personal matter, but the moment I doubted her, she started telling a story.

“Hi, in case you all forget my name. it was Bumi!” she always had the energy with her at this late. “The name came from the eight song on Dewa 19’s third album ‘Terbaik Terbaik’ Does anyone know which one?”

The audience looked confused. I actually knew the fact she and his brother named after ‘Restu Bumi’, but I held myself from answering the question.

“Never mind. I was born in the military family. My father was a mayor in the marine corps. My grandpa was a PETA army, basically a national hero. I didn’t know about my great-grandpa, but I bet he also fought the dutch with a bamboo spear. There’s a patriot bloodline in my body. It explains why always rebel against them who try to infiltrate my homeland. To be honest, my life wasn’t as tough as yours. I was a spoiled kid with the privilege of being born into wealth. My father was rich and respected, always exuding pride and dignity with him. But when no one was around, he turned into a completely different person. My father was like a devil who tormented me and my brother, while my mother was like an angel who offered warmth and salvation. Whenever I got punished by my father for my wrongdoings, my mother would calm me down and treat me with something I liked. They were playing their role as a good cop and a bad cop very well. That’s why I’ve got attachment issues. I was afraid of being left alone. These insecurities would gnaw at me, driving me insane. One moment I would be as happy as a newly married couple, and the next minute I would be sad as if tomorrow were the end of the world. I need someone to validate my feelings, to be there when I need them the most, and to tell me that no matter happens, they will be there for me. I want them to praise me and convince me that I’m the prettiest girl in the world, that my picture of me should be hanged on Louvre Museum instead of

Mona Lisa. I would give anything to them in return. Anything. Like a grateful genie who has been freed from the magic lamp and grants them three wishes in return.”

“Oh, I’m tired of the long faces. Can I do something to lift up the vibes?” The Japanese troupe nodded in unison. “Now, let me ask you again, Rakha Thrisna. Please don’t let me down. The last time I asked you this question was almost a year ago. Do you think I’m pretty?”

Others gasped in amazement. I was going to answer her question when her index finger halted me from talking.

“If you truly think I’m the prettiest girl in the whole world, would you want to kiss me?” she asked.

It wasn’t the warmth of the bonfire. The heat I’d felt right now was surging from within the core of my heart. I observed her. The light trapped in her deep black eyes, resembling two lost souls which struggled to escape through the thin film. I brushed away her messy, limp hair clinging to her temple and cheeks. I could clearly see the grainy texture of her freckles, prominent against her colorless face. People who didn’t know her well or had just met her might think that they were grains of sand. But not me, I know her inside out. She was the only thing in my mind right now. I couldn’t care less about the rest. The night wrapped us like a cocoon, shielding us from the outside world. It was just the two of us. The buildings were falling apart. She was my Marla Singer. I was her Tyler Durden. She met me at a very strange time in my life. Of course, I kissed her. Who in the right mind would miss the chance to touch the tender lips of an angel? As our lips met, a connection was forged. Two physical bodies acted as the intermediary, while in another reality, our souls intertwined and merged as one. The feelings transcended an intangible realm, beyond the reach of the five senses. For a moment, we were eternal, forever young and free.

## Chapter 11

There was a blockade on Gejayan Street. Every inch of it was swarmed with a sea of people from various backgrounds, including academics, activists, and civilians, gathering for a mass demonstration, known as Gejayan Memanggil. The sun was directly above their heads, with no clouds to hinder its rays. They couldn't care no more about the scorching sunlight, as their hearts were ignited by the blazing spirit for change in Indonesia. This wasn't the first time people had done this. It had happened several times before, with various demands echoing through the streets for the past 21 years, starting back in 1998. Today was no different. The crowd gathered, brandishing banners painted in black and red Pylox paint, and protested the government's recent ratification of the RKHUP. They demanded that President Jokowi revoke the decision and conduct a reevaluation. In the middle of the crowd, a few people whom I assumed as the pioneers stood on the white pickup truck. One of them held a megaphone, delivering an impassioned speech. The guy mimicked Bung Tomo's fiery rhetoric, stirring up the crowd even more. Bumi and I could barely hear anything from a distance, but we definitely could sensed the energy. It's purely by chance we were here. Four days ago, Restu's condition worsened, so we had to bring him to the hospital for intensive care. The doctor said his heart rhythm was showing abnormalities and he had to undergo a surgery, which was planned for one week from now. We spent

the rest of the night at Restu's side, keeping vigil. Morning dawned, and we hadn't eaten anything since last night. Feeling hungry, we decided to find something outside. Bumi wasn't pleased with the idea of eating at a restaurant inside the hospital. She said the strong disinfectant smell subdued her appetite, not to mention the dull whiteness of the hospital walls, floors, and fluorescent lamps or the constant clink of the metallic medical instruments. It was nine when we left the place. Walking along, we spotted a mass demonstration on the opposite street. Next thing we knew, we were standing on the line of protesters. Turned out the location of the hospital was practically right by the whole thing. We retrieved ourselves from the scene and decided to grab some porridge near the hospital. It was basically an open area with a food cart parked in the middle and a couple of polyester tables with polyethylene chairs thrown in. We got our porridge in white bowls with pictures of the legendary chickens.

Bumi stirred the bowl, mixing the ingredients together while I preferred to ate it raw.

"Quiet a scene, isn't it?" Bumi said.

"Yeah. Happens all the time throughout history." I added.

"Somehow it's different from what I've expected."

"Less chaotic, more organized"

"Less romantic, more practical."

I sipped the iced tea clean. Bumi was still munching her food. She was a slow eater. "You think so?"

"I love the agenda, but not the participants."

"What's wrong about them?"

"It frustrates me to see some people who just don't get the point of this protest. Not all of them share the same goals. Of course some people are really into the matter, but look at the people huddled under the shadows of the buildings. They

didn't want to sweat or listen to the oration. Their focus is engrossed in their phones, their minds lost elsewhere, caring only about their image in the virtual world. It's people like that, who just take advantage, that really get to me. I'm not in the position to badmouth them. Look, I'm a psychology student. I have zero knowledge about law, but at least I wasn't pretending to be someone else or tried to impress people by doing such things."

She pushed the bowl towards me, indicating that I should eat the rest of her food. I gladly accepted her generosity.

"You know what? Before I entered college, I secretly learned about politics. I heard a rumor from our alumni that the college student would hang out all night, discussing about left wing and right wing ideologies until sunrise. After that, they would plan to oppose the academic institution and the government. The notion scared so much that I thought I wouldn't make any friends they found out that my brain was a tiny sponge soaked with stupid things. I started reading the newspaper that my father left behind before going to work. I wasn't done there. I checked out all popular political books. I read Karl Max 'Das Kapital' and quit after after only a few pages. The dense writing style left me bored and dispirited. The thing that was still stick with me was corn and iron. I refuse to give up so quickly and made another shot with a different book. This time it was written by our kind. I can't recall his name, was it Man Takala, Tan Makala.."

"Tan Malaka." I corrected her, as I cleaned out her bowl. It tasted delicious that my hunger wouldn't cease.

"Right, right. I read the title, Madilog, and opened the first page. Ugh, that writing style was outdated! But this time, I felt pretty confident with the introduction. I made it all the way to chapter two until I saw the word 'Marx.' Now I'm stuck again!



Never in my lifetime have I ever cried over stupid books. Those things were starting to drive me crazy! The crimson red books looked more like devil's almanacs. I swore I could hear them mocking me! I shoved them under the bed so I wouldn't have to see them again. Stuff like that still haunted me until I graduated and became a real college student myself. It's absolutely true, and it's even worse than I imagined. It's where the real rat race begins. The 'rats' compete against each other, stepping on those who are below them to get the cheese. It's a 'to kill or be killed' scenario. They aim to influence others with their knowledge superiority, gain top positions in organizations, and build relationships with alumni solely to secure high-paying jobs. No one is doing it anymore out of passion. I became hopeless, succumbed to cruel world. I acted like other people, dressed like other people, and smiled like other people, just to ensure I was in the safe spot. But after some consideration, I would rather be an idiot than a radical. It's easier to live like that. Fulfilling people's expectations wouldn't get you anywhere. Am I stupid or the subject was indeed too hard too learn? Which do you think is right?

"I didn't know myself." I drank her orange juice. "Because we're on the same boat."

"What do you mean we're on the same boat?"

"I was blind to politics."

"Really!?" Her voice boomed in surprise. "Oops, sorry. Did I get a little loud there?"

"No one's going to notice since it was so loud out here."

"I thought you're a walking google. That makes me glad that at some point I realized you are just a normal human being, like me!"

I just replied with a smile.

We paid for our food and headed back to the hospital. Bumi had to attend her classes so I would be left alone with Restu for hours. I entered the hospital through the basement lift. It was quicker that way. Inside the elevator, there were three people inside the lift. The person on my left was a man who looked anxious and the person on my right was a teenager who seemed to hold her breath. Perhaps the man was waiting for her wife to give birth and the girl was crying inside because she just lost someone precious. If you thought about it, a hospital was actually a place of irony: where life and death seemed to exchanged hands, where someone's life both started and ended at the same time. The red digital number displayed the number three. I got out and walked to Restu's room. Right before I entered, I could hear whispering voices inside. The room was intended for two people, so it must be someone paid another visit to the other patient. The creak of the door made her tilt her head. We shared a smile. She was an old women in her late fifties, judging by the white of her hair was. The room was divided by a tall cream curtain. Restu's bed was near the window. He was sleeping, with medical equipment attached to his body. His breath was steady. The white tuberoses from two days ago was already lost its vigor, but the fresh scent still lingered in the air. Bumi would bring a new one once she returned. I sat on the stool next to him, doing nothing in particular. I could hear the drip of the infusion, the humming sound of the air conditioner, the steady beep of the electrocardiogram, and the woman nagging her husband all the time. I didn't intend to eavesdrop but with it just happened naturally. The old lady talked about how ungrateful their children were. She mentioned the fact that she conceived, birthed, and raised them all, and how her husband used to leave at dawn and returned at dusk just to feed them. Now,

none of them bother to visit their sick father. I didn't know about his illness. Everyone could appear healthy on the outside, but carried a deadly disease inside. Soon, the woman left. I could hear her pack up her things and left. I was still hungry after eating one and a half bowls of porridge, so I took an apple, an tangerine, and a small kitchen knife from the plastic bag stored beneath the coffee table. Bumi and I bought a lot of fruits yesterday, so it wouldn't be an issue if I ate one or two. I decided to eat the apple first. It was an Washington, recognized by its gleaming red and scattered white dots. I peeled carefully, as thin as possible, so I wouldn't lose an ounce of the juicy flesh of the apple. I sliced it into eight pieces and ate it with my bare hand. It was crisp and had the perfect balance of sweet and sour. I moved on to the next course, the tangerine. Tangerine didn't necessarily need a knife to open it. it was a simple version of an orange, with a special coating on the outside of its flesh that prevented it from sticking to the skin. I could peel it with my hands. The tricky part was eating it because you have to avoid the bitter seeds inside. It was too acidic and lacked sweetness. Two fruits were enough to make satisfy my hunger. I collected the waste in the plastic bag before throw it out in the garbage can. I focused on Restu. The thoughts about him arose. Was he dreaming about something or he just had a deep sleep where nothing happened? If he was dreaming, was he dreaming about me and Bumi? Was his heart condition alright in there? I just realized how much I missed his presence in my life, Restu, my only real friend. I missed our late-night conversations we used to call 'night class worth three credits.' I hadn't had a chance to talk with him about life lately. The conditions were simply not possible. I was thinking of having a monologue with him. I spoke a few word softly to keep my voice down so it wouldn't be too loud and disturb the other patient.

“Hey, buddy. All is well. All is well. All is well. Just like Rancho used to say. Even though things feel pretty rough right now, gotta tell my heart, 'All is well.' I wish you a speedy recovery so we could do some stupid stuff together again. You should see what the world has become. So much has happened while you were gone. People were rioting outside. I bet you would have been in the line with them if you weren't here. You are a hooligan and you seem to enjoy getting involved with chaos. Don't worry about us. I'm okay. Bumi is alright. Her academics were surprisingly good, unlike us. I guess physics was more complicated than the human realm. Sometimes, I ask myself: Why would someone as perfect as you want to be my friend? What did you see in me when we first met at that dormitory? Why did you choose that crappy place to live when you could have rented a room with a private bathroom and air conditioner? If you had done that, I wouldn't be here right now. I wouldn't even know Bumi. I would be at home, reading a book and hoping time would pass by quietly, slowly. Or what would have happen if we were placed in the same class back in elementary school. Would our friendship have worked out? You're a popular kid, aren't you? Other students gathered around you. Teachers also loved and admired you. You've been known by the other students for being a student of the year, going to school in a Rubicon driven by your private chauffeur, having a red taekwondo belt, and your signature three-point fadeaway jumpshot. Would you still want to be friends with a loser like me? People would forget me entirely or remember me as the transfer student, while you will always be remembered as the cool kid. Speaking of school, do you still remember Mr. Khoiri? The guy with big muscles and a Dutch face. He was our elementary school teacher. To be specific, he taught English and physical education. What a weird

combination, isn't it? There's actually one thing I still remember about him to this day. It wasn't how he wrote the grammar rules in the whiteboard, or how he demonstrated kicking a ball. No, the one thing I remember most was his post-class story, especially the horror one. He would save the last fifteen minutes just to tell the story: no matter how boring the subject was that day, in the end, every student sat with their backs straight, engrossed on listening to him. He would clear the whiteboard, rolled up his sleeves, and settle on the edge teacher's table. Silent fell and the teacher began the story. The story begins with three lumberjacks who are on the way home after months working in the deep forest. They had to walk for hours, considering the distance between the logging camp and the villages. Hours pass by, and they still haven't reach the destination. One of them, notices something is wrong. Indeed, the distance they need to cover is far, but this time, it's taking twice as long as usual. His friend said maybe his estimation was off and it's better to keep going before dark. Finally after a long and exhausting walk, they reach the village at midnight. Once again, something strange happens. The village they used to know feels a little bit different. It is pitch dark, and the only source of light is one of the house located at the edge of the village. They decide to follow the trail of the light. They stand at the front yard, each of them knowing which house it belongs to. It was the village chief's house. The door opened, revealing a large figure on the porch. The lumberjacks feel relieve after realizing it's the village chief's wife. The madam offers them to come in and they gladly her invitation. She ushers them to the dining table full of food. Pepes, grilled chicken, fried eggs, mixed vegetables, and many other dishes are served. Just by looking at it, the lumberjacks can't hide the fact they are starving from the long journey. They are welcomed to eat

anything on the table with one condition: they aren't allowed to touch the hot sauce. They all ask the same question in their hearts: why are we forbidden to eat it? Hot sauce is a basic staple of spice so it would be bland to eat without it. They hold themselves back from asking because it's considered rude. Of course it makes them dissatisfied, but it's better than eating nothing. The food is so delicious it makes them sleepy. They fall asleep as soon as they finish their meal. Morning comes, and the lumberjacks are terrified to find out that they are sleeping on the graveyard. Soon it becomes a hot topic in the village. The news finally reaches the village's chief. The truth is, her wife died last week, and he doesn't have any clue about the hot sauce incident. Another week passes by. The village chief was working on his workplace when he was approached by one of his people. She introduced herself as the vegetable seller and told him that his late wife still had a debt for the chilies she bought before she died. So, after all this time, the wandering wife just wants to tell somebody that she still has some unfinished business in this world. Mystery solved and the story ended, leaving me and the rest of the class stunned. We talked about it about a week and then forgot about it when Mr. Khoiri came up with another story. But not me. I still remember the story to this day. The way gigantic trunks stands still and the owls' hoots in the night created an everlasting memory in my mind, it's almost like I experienced it firsthand without actually being there. Kind of weird, isn't it?"

There was no response. I sighed after telling a long tale. My throat was dry from talking so much, so I opened the lid of my water bottle and emptied it. I drew back the second layer of curtains to let the sunlight in, making it bright enough to read a book. However, I couldn't maintain my focus on my reading. I was distracted by my surroundings. I occasionally checked his

heart rate, his condition, and the clock on the opposite wall. Finally, I closed my book and let myself get lost in thoughts.

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I fell asleep when Bumi returned in the afternoon with a bucket of white chrysanthemums. Restu was awake, but he didn't seem to move an inch. She carefully lifted the wilted tuberose, threw it away, changed the water in the vase, and put the fresh flowers in. Restu was awake but couldn't do much. The nurse came in, smiled, commented on the flowers, and said it was time for Restu to clean himself. She helped him unbutton his shirt and sit on the bed. I noticed he had lost some weight and muscle. She lifted up a bucket from the trolley, took out the sponge, squeezed it, and gently patted Restu's skin. The nurse excused herself, so did I. I needed to be at work by seven. Bumi offered me a ride, but I declined. I told her I preferred taking the bus and suggested she keep an eye out for her brother. I left the building and breathed fresh air. Even though it was filled with emissions from the vehicles, it's better than the air inside the hospital. It felt more alive. The orange-violet hue of afternoon streamed through the city. I walked to the shuttle, got myself a ticket, and waited. My bus arrived, and I hopped in. The traffic was worse because people were going home from work. I was already behind the register at the music shop within an hour. Suddenly, it started raining heavily outside. The raindrops pelted the windows, casting a glaring light that mixed yellow street lamps with red car tail lights. It was September, so the weather was no surprise. The rain turned out to be a blessing in disguise, as it meant fewer visitors to the store. I took down the white Flying V guitar hanging on the wall and noticed a small bump on the headstock. Clearly, someone had tried it out and accidentally knocked it against the wall. It couldn't have been me because I treat my guitar like my baby, always

handling it with special care. After tuning it, I began playing some appergios to train my muscle memory, aiming for smooth performance and avoiding wrong notes. My fingers moved up and down, jumping from one fret to another, following a specific scale. I was deeply absorbed in my guitar practice when suddenly a car headlight blinded my vision. I recognized the revving of the engine, the classic four-cylinder with a 2000cc engine—typical of Honda. It was Bumi's blue sedan. The lights abruptly shut off as the engine was cut. I checked my phone: Bumi hadn't left a call or sent me a message. Usually, she would notify me if she wanted to meet. The bell above the shop door jingled as she entered with her shirt damp from the rain. She was carrying a big plastic bag, placed it on the glass display case, and revealed its contents.

"Look what I've brought," she said, holding two Baileys in both hands. "Is it already closing hour yet?"

"Not yet, but maybe I could make an exception since it's raining hard outside."

I went to the back and returned with two glass.

"Can I smoke here? There isn't any fire detector installed on the ceiling, is there?"

"I think so. The other part-timer used to smoke inside when I came to work."

I thought it was a vape, but she brought the classic Sampoerna mild.

"Want some?"

"I'm good."

"Ah, shit. I forgot to bring a lighter," she exclaimed, smacking her face with her palm. "Well, it's definitely not my lucky day. Maybe be I should ask Zeus to send his thunderstruck to my cigar."

"Ask Prometheus instead."



“Who’s that guy? Is he Icarus’ illegitimate brother?”

“No. While Icarus is a mere mortal human, Prometheus is one of the Titans.”

“Hold your breath. Let’s toast our drinks.”

I poured the creamy whiskey liquid and we clinked our glasses. It went down smoothly.

“That’s better. Go on.”

“Where was I?”

“Titans. Oh, one more thing. Can you tell the Greek mythology in chronological order? I only have vague memories from the first movie in the Percy Jackson series.”

“Sure. If you’re willing to hear the story, because it’s going to be a long night.”

“We have enough booze for the whole night.”

“Long ago, there lay nothingness. The world was a void until chaos appeared out of nowhere and the primordial gods emerged. These gods were Gaia, who personified the earth, Tartarus, who personified the underworld, and Eros, who personified love.”

“Whoa, it’s the same as my name. Next time someone asks me about my name, I should boast them about this.”

“To simplify things, I’m going to stick with the main story and tell the detail later. Gaia gave birth to Ouranus, who represented sky and soon became her husband. Together they had many children, including the twelve Titans, three Cyclopes, and three Hecatoncheires, creature with fifty heads and one hundred arms each. However, being scared of their powers and repelled by their looks, Ouranus imprisoned their monstrous sons by pushing them into her wife’s womb. This mistreatment angered Gaia, prompting her to plot against her husband. Gaia asked her sons and daughters to overthrow their father, but only the youngest and bravest son, Chronos, the God of Time,

accepted his mother's request. He borrowed a powerful sickle from Gaia and ascended to the heavens. When Uranus was naked and preparing to unite with Gaia, Chronos swiftly appeared and cut his father's testicles clean. With Ouranus defeated, Chronos took control and became the ruler of the universe alongside the other Titans. Long story short, Chronos did the same thing by consuming his children. A war broke out between the Titans and the gods, and Zeus successfully overthrew his father and his siblings, becoming the rightful ruler. He and the other Olympians then established themselves in Mount Olympus.”

“If Zeus defeated the Titans, what about Prometheus?”

“Oh, you’re going to love this part. Prometheus was indeed a Titan, but he oversaw the outcome of the war and sided with the gods. After the war, Zeus tasked Prometheus and his twin brother, Epimetheus, with populating the earth with animals. Epimetheus happily took on the job. He created animals that flew freely in the sky, others that lived on the surface and resided in trees, and yet more that swam and never left the water. Prometheus began to sculpt humans from the mud as well. When he wanted to give humans a trait, Epimetheus accidentally used up the rest of the traits on the other creatures. Without these traits, humans didn’t do much and spent most of their time hiding in the cave to avoid predators. When Zeus saw Prometheus’ fragile creations, he laughed and told him that humans should be worshipers of the gods. Prometheus, who loved his creatures more than anything, gifted them fire and taught them how to write and forge metals. They began to roam the earth, sail the sea, and explore its vast landscapes afterward. Zeus gave Prometheus the second task: to make a sacrifice to the gods. Prometheus wasn’t happy about the idea, so he split the offering into two different parts. One

was a chunk of meat hidden in the smelly stomach and guts, and the other was bones wrapped in the fattiest meat. Zeus chose the second one and quickly realized he had been deceived. Outraged, Zeus took the fire away from humans. Without the fire, humans began retreating to the cave. Prometheus didn't stop there. He secretly crept to Olympus and retrieved fire for the humans. With Prometheus' act, Zeus punished him by chaining his body to a rock on a mountain. Lying on the Caucasus Mountain, Prometheus suffered from Zeus' punishment. His organs were torn apart and eaten by vultures, only to grow back overnight and endure the same torment for eternity. This was all due to Prometheus' kindness and affection toward mortal creatures, humanity."

"So, Zeus was the bad guy."

"All gods had their wrongdoings."

"It's hard to fathom Why Prometheus would do such things? Why did he care so much about his weak creations? I mean, he was basically a God, right?"

"Didn't we do the same thing? If we take the same analogy, we were gods in the eyes of helpless babies, and we cared so much about them. We nurtured them to be capable and independent. Maybe that's the reason why. Either Prometheus or humans, they did it out of love."

"He shouldn't have created humans in the first place. Look at ourselves right now. Nothing but a mess, heading toward destruction."

We half-emptied the first bottle. The alcohol slowly dispersed in our blood.

"If we're married, do you want to have a child?" she inquired.

"It depends on you. You're the one who's going to bear the pain for 9 months."

“It’s not as simple as carrying a baby for 9 months.”

“I’m sorry.”

“Don’t be. I know you didn’t mean it that way. Not to underestimate or boast, but I think I could bear the physical pain. As long as I live, I’ve had two big surgeries. The first one happened when I was in elementary school. I loved to daydream, and I was doing it while crossing the street. I survived with two stitches on my head, two broken ribs, and bruises all over my body. The second one happened when I was in middle school. An appendectomy. I wasn’t expecting it because I was living a healthy life. Turns out it was because I had a habit of eating fruit seeds. Funny, isn’t it? When you think it makes you strong, instead it slowly kills you. From those two, I didn’t shed a single tear, not even let out a whine. It’s not because I couldn’t feel it. I was suffering inside. Maybe because I used to hide my tears from my father, it made me this way. I thought I wouldn’t be any different if I screamed or stayed silent. It doesn’t make the pain any less painful. Being a mother is entirely different. It’s not just about the process of conceiving and delivering a baby. It’s also about how you raise your children. Am I ready to become a mother to my future child? Are you ready to be a father to them? Could we provide them with what they need and ensure they are happy and not lonely? What if things don’t go our way? What if they become something we didn’t want them to be? What if they take on a darker path? Would you pass the responsibility onto someone else? Would you repeat the same mistakes your parents made with you? If you asked whether I want to have a child or not, of course I do. My mother said having me and Restu was the most beautiful thing in the world. But if you asked me whether I was ready or not, I don’t know the answer myself. Is it something that comes to you naturally once you become a mother?”

The light suddenly went off as Bumi finished her part.

"Damn, I guess Zeus took away our fire again," she joked around. "Maybe we should ask Prometheus for a refill."

I genuinely laughed. It was a high-quality joke. It was past twelve and we finished the first bottle. I was going to ask her to go home when she opened the second one.

## Chapter 12

**B**umi called me. She told me the surgery had failed. Restu took his last breath just moments ago.

## FICTION

In the heart of Jogjakarta, Rakha Thrisna, an introspective engineering student, immerses himself in the vibrant yet tranquil tapestry of the city. With a keen eye for detail, Rakha uncovers the hidden intricacies of human connections and the universal quest for meaning. As he navigates the chaos of social interactions and serene moments of solitude, he becomes a silent witness to the lives around him, each encounter offering profound insights into love, loss, and the fleeting beauty of life.

Through chance meetings and deep reflections, "The Observer" paints a vivid portrait of a culturally rich environment. Grappling with his own emotions and aspirations, Rakha learns that true understanding often lies in the quiet spaces between words and actions. With eloquent prose and poignant storytelling, "The Observer" invites readers to explore the beauty of life's ephemeral moments and the profound impact of human connection in an ever-changing world.

